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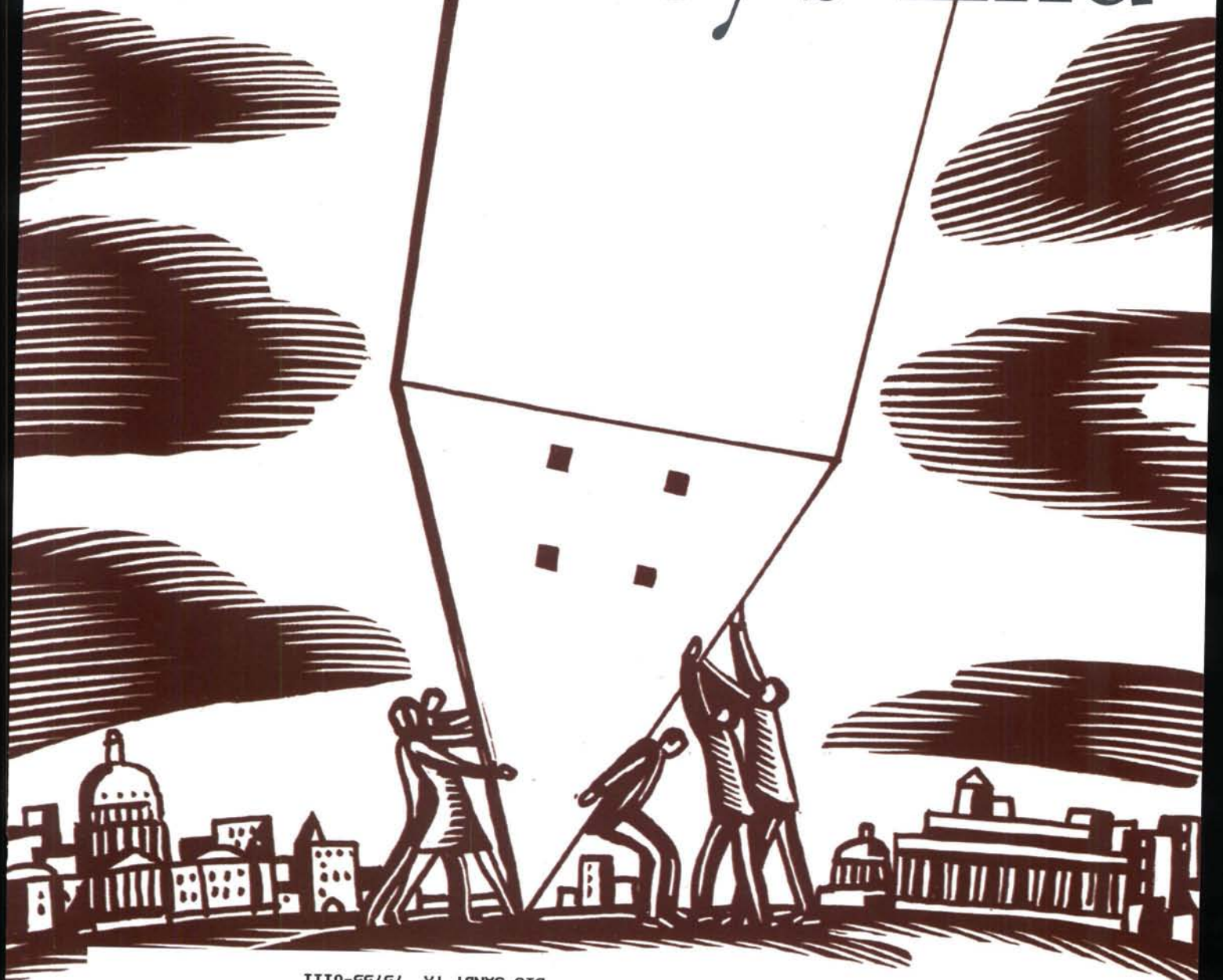

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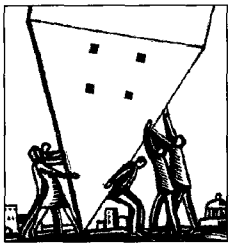

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CORRESPONDENCE

Shy away

To the editors:

In commenting on the media's avoidance of Clintonian scandals during the election season, William Powers ("Scandal-Shy," December 16, 1996) indirectly raises a real dilemma in current politics: How can a voter express disapproval of a candidate's character without also expressing disapproval of that candidate's policies? I feel Paula Jones's pain if her allegations are true, but any such harassment is of microscopic concern to me as a citizen. Nothing that Bill Clinton could have done in office—from influence-peddling to cheating at poker—would have caused me to vote for Bob Dole and endorse supply-side economics and the Christian Coalition agenda. And if you question people who claim that Clinton is unfit to hold office, you will almost always find that they oppose him on philosophical grounds anyway.

I can think of two ways to make officeholders more accountable for their behavior. One improvement would be political parties that are more powerful than individual candidates, so that they could deny renomination to ethically challenged incumbents. (Right now, even indicted congressmen can count on party leaders to help them fend off primary challenges from better candidates.) Another reform would be a real multiparty system—with Greens and Libertarians offering a choice to Democrats and Republicans, respectively—so that a voter can express his disgust with an officeholder without having to repudiate his own political beliefs. Until then, most informed voters know that they have little say over their leaders' behavior. They certainly wouldn't jump party fences even if *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* pleaded with them to do so.

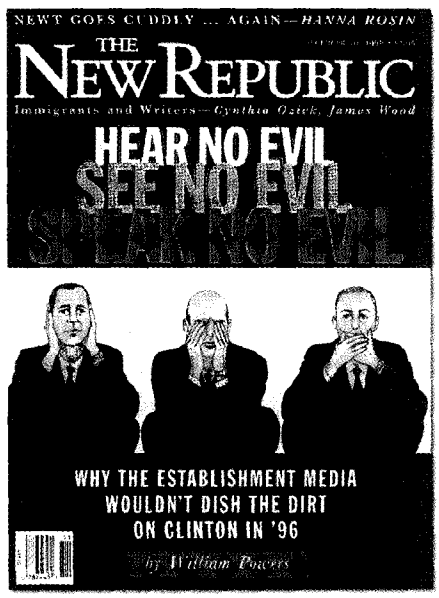
ROBERT DAVID SULLIVAN
Boston, Massachusetts

To the editors:

William Powers's piece "Scandal-Shy" joined a chorus of articles from Robert Novak, George Will, the *Weekly Standard* and conservatives accusing the liberal media of ignoring Clinton's scandals, and blaming the media's inherent liberal bias. This misses two major points:

(1) Bob Dole also had a long history of sketchy ethical behavior that was almost unremarked on throughout the campaign. These included large contributions from ADM and Chiquita in return for multiple, large and obvious political favors. His ADM-supplied Florida condo and constant use of the ADM jet. Massive and well-documented push polling in crucial primaries. And, of course, the general principle that, if you keep on trumpeting values, you better be pretty clean yourself.

(2) The distinction between socially and economically liberal. Almost all of the examples mentioned by Powers are of socially liberal opinions. What he doesn't mention is the media rarely talked of any issues which challenged the economic structure of the country. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* do seem to reveal a condescending socially liberal attitude, but they almost never run any major stories questioning the right of corporations (like themselves) to merge and buy any property they want. Nor do they run articles exploring the fact that the wealthy are paying much less in taxes than previously, with absolutely no proven benefits for economic growth. In fact, there was almost no mention in the campaign that Clinton had only raised taxes on the wealthiest couple of percent of the population. In addition, there is the obvious point that most of the capital's pundits and commentators are clearly center to right, e.g. George Will, Robert Novak, David Brinkley, Charles Krauthammer, etc. So, although the press might be socially liberal, it also supports the existing conservative economic status quo.


NEWT GOES CUDDLY ... AGAIN—HANNA ROSIN
THE NEW REPUBLIC
Immigrants and Writers—Cynthia Ozick, James Wood
HEAR NO EVIL
SEE NO EVIL
SPEAK NO EVIL
WHY THE ESTABLISHMENT MEDIA WOULDN'T DISH THE DIRT ON CLINTON IN '96
by William Powers

HAMILTON HUMES
Washington, D.C.

Core mistakes

To the editors:

Helen Vendler is angry ("The Booby Trap," October 7, 1996). But anger sometimes blinds, and in this case it has led one of the finest of contemporary critics to stumble badly.

Disregarding David Denby's disclaimers, Vendler insists on taking his book as a guide to Columbia's core curriculum. Had she bothered to check with anyone who teaches at Columbia she would have avoided many misconceptions about the course, especially those concerning which books get taught. In her eagerness to offer her own counter-cannon, Vendler wonders "what a different sense of Western civilization students would have" and what "a send-up of solemn 'ideas' as the foundation of Western culture" it would be if Columbia's students were exposed to such works as Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Plato's *Symposium* and Petronius's *Satyricon*. Her alternative canon will sound familiar enough to those who teach Literature Humanities, where these and scores of other books have appeared on the ever-changing reading list and will no doubt appear again. Her notion of the course's syllabus as solemn and immutable is a fantasy—as is the ideology she attributes to the course, based on her facile assumption that the reading list necessarily produces a monolithic reading of Western civilization which is then accepted unquestioningly by impressionable students.

Vendler goes on to invent—in order to condemn—a working model of the course Denby took based on a biased reading of Denby's highly subjective experience. Anyone who has ever taught knows the folly of relying on a student's version of what happens in a class: like most students, Denby tends to recall and reflect upon parts of the course that he found meaningful and memorable. Thus, for example, because Denby is keen on ethics and politics Vendler attacks the course for ignoring other concerns, particularly aesthetic ones. In reality, class discussions range widely over such topics as literary form, authorship, philology, myth, subjectivity, community, religion, history, law, love, sex, suicide, happiness and just about everything else of interest to students and teachers.

Vendler's mockery gets out of hand in her sneering attacks on Columbia undergraduates. Based on snippets of class discussion Denby quotes as a springboard for his own insights, Vendler decides that class time consists of "bull sessions" in which "students hash over lightweight arguments." Her comments reveal more about her condescending attitude toward undergraduates than about what took place in extended discussions she was neither part of nor privy to. Once again, Vendler doesn't know what she is talking about.

The same holds true for her reference

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to "Columbia's tendency with literary texts." Can she really believe such nonsense? I'm afraid to say that this institutional tendency exists only in Vendler's overheated imagination: Columbia professors, who have been trained and taught at dozens of universities, including her own, bring a predictably broad range of literary approaches to the classroom.

One of the lessons of Denby's book is that those who engage in the culture wars ought to write from what they observe, not what they like to believe they know; it is an admonition that Helen Vendler should have taken to heart.

JAMES SHAPIRO
New York, New York

Conservative estimate

To the editors:

John B. Judis ("Huddled Elites," December 23, 1996) does a fine job describing how the lobbying developed to postpone—not defeat—legal immigration reform in the 104th Congress. But his challenge that the bipartisan Commission on Immigration Reform "didn't offer any justification" for eliminating categories for extended family migration shouldn't go unanswered. In the short run, we want the visas now used for siblings and adult children to be used for moms, dads and little kids. In the long run, we were equally candid about our priorities.

The reason the commission was honest and blunt about the long-range priorities for legal admission is simple, and ought to resonate with any genuine conservative: governments should not promise what they will not deliver. Our current system for legal immigration promises that Americans may petition for their family members: legal permanent residents petition for spouses and minor children, as well as adult, unmarried children; citizens petition for spouses, minor children, parents and adult unmarried children, as well as brothers and sisters. But it does not deliver the visas for all these categories. This has very serious consequences. It makes illegal many hundreds of thousands of intact nuclear families of legal immigrants. It creates backlogs measured in decades. That promotes illegal immigration and erodes the rule of law.

Grown-ups understand that it is necessary to make choices in life. Conservatives emphasize that when "we, the people" make choices in government, we must deliver on our priorities. Social conservatives like myself especially recognize that government policies which are anti-family must be changed. That is why we need legal immigration reform.

There is a backlog of more than a million husbands and wives, parents and young children, who are either physically separated by U.S. law or else united—illegally—in the United States. Obviously, it makes no sense to perpetuate a conflict between our laws and the sacred value we ought to place, as a society, on strong, intact nuclear families. Much of this backlog—roughly the first 800,000 in line—is due to the still unfinished business of the 1986 amnesty, which legalized mostly men, and not their families. Opponents of reform try to pretend that this problem does not exist, but that is simply telling the last 300,000 people in the line (plus the 90,000 who join the line every year) that they won't have to wait, just as soon as everyone in front of them has gotten their green cards. But without reform, this will not happen until well into the next century, if ever.

There is another backlog of about 1.7 million brothers and sisters, of whom about 65,000 are admitted each year. We will never eliminate this waiting list. No one has ever proposed enough visas to get current in the sibling category. What national interest is served, then, by holding out the false promise of sibling reunions that can't legally happen for literally generations, with visas that could be used right now to unite the closest family members?

Immigration reform must be both pro-family and pro-immigrant, to serve the national interest.

ROBERT CHARLES HILL
Washington, D.C.

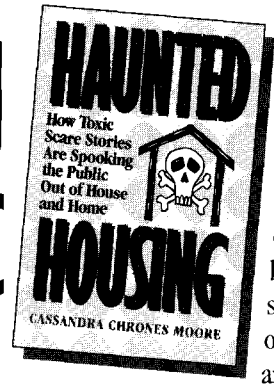
Adams's values

To the editors:

Michael Makovsky ("Correspondence," December 16, 1996) took Michael Kelly to school for claiming that Ralph Nader was the first presidential candidate to disavow campaigning. It turns out that John Quincy Adams also refused to campaign, Makovsky noted, and lost big time to Andrew Jackson as a result. Just to set the historical record straight, George Washington did not campaign. Nor did John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison or James Monroe. And they all won. John Quincy Adams was following their example in 1828, believing as they did that campaigning was undignified for a truly virtuous public servant. John Quincy's mistake was to presume that such an aristocratic posture could survive in the emerging democratic culture that Tocqueville described and Jackson symbolized.

JOSEPH J. ELLIS
South Hadley, Massachusetts

Spooking the Public Out of House and Home?



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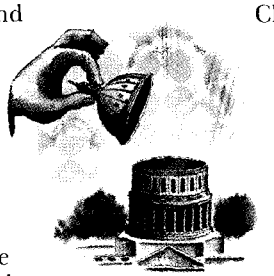
FROM WASHINGTON

Why it matters

For several years now, those who have made it their labor, or their labor of love, to defend the Clintons and the Clinton White House against accusations of ethical and legal misconduct have insisted the various matters at hand were individually unimportant and collectively incoherent: Whitewater, Travelgate, the FBI files, etc., were small and disconnected parts that combined to form nothing. Critics maintained that these things did amount to something definite and significant: they were indications that the president and the advisers closest to him had a predilection for corrupt practices and the abuse of power. This predilection, critics suggested, was rooted in the crony-centered practices of the Arkansas statehouse and in the politics of total-war waged by the Clintonites.

In this context, Travelgate mattered not so much in itself but for what it said about the new people in the White House: in this case, that they were willing to use the power of the state to destroy the careers and imperil the liberties of innocent people to benefit a crony of the president. So too, the decision to fire the White House usher (because he had spoken on the telephone to former First Lady Barbara Bush) and to fire the aged White House telephone operators (because those jobs could be filled by partisans). So too, in its revelatory nature, Whitewater and Hillary Rodham Clinton's commodity deals, which exposed the promiscuous nature of the intercourse between those who had money and those who had power in Arkansas. So too, the White House's improper collection of the FBI files of some 900 Republicans. So too, the charges (by the non-ideological Center for Public Integrity) that companies that gave money to Clinton's 1992 campaign were rewarded with assistance from Ron Brown's Commerce Department in striking immensely lucrative foreign trade deals. And so too, the pattern of White House officials obstructing—through the employment of faulty memories and other, more perjurious, means—the congressional inquiries into all of this.



These things mattered because they were portents. And what they portended is now at hand. President Clinton took office promising to run the most ethical White House in history. It became impossible, early on, to pretend this was so, as the Clinton White House and the Clinton-controlled Democratic National Committee continued the unethical money-grubbing practices of the Bush administration. But at least, Clinton's defenders could say, this White House was no worse than its Republican predecessors. Now, with its solicitation of the species of legalized bribery called soft money, the Clinton administration has set a level of corruption, greed and abuse (of privilege, certainly; of power, it appears increasingly likely) that is unprecedented.

The revelations that have come out in recent weeks, in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, read like a Michael Crichton novel:

• Last March, a Little Rock businessman named Charles Yah Lin Trie dropped by the president's legal defense trust with two manila envelopes overflowing with bundled checks and money orders totaling $460,000. Investigators for the trust found that almost all the $1,000 checks making up the sum had come from Asian Americans, most of whom were apparently tied to a Buddhist sect of which they were members, more than half of whom did not have the financial resources to make such contributions, and most of whom said they had never heard of Trie. The fund rejected $378,300 out of hand. But it went ahead and accepted a second tranche of $122,585, which it kept until threatened with public disclosure—and after Hillary Clinton and White House Deputy Chief of Staff Harold Ickes were informed of the taint in Trie's contributions. And Trie? On April 17, after Trie's initial, questionably crooked contribution was under investigation, the president named his generous pal to the government's Commission on United States-Pacific Trade and Investment Policy—signing an executive order increasing the number of commissioners in order to do so.

• Last spring, Clinton, Vice President Al Gore and senior advisers including Ickes and Chief of Staff Leon Panetta

continued on page 41

INSIDE THE VATICAN

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THOMAS J. REESE

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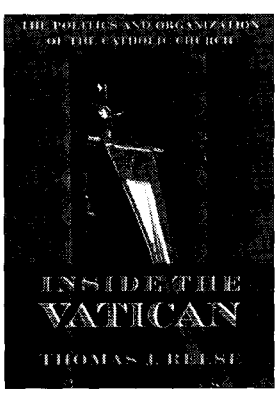

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

JANUARY 20, 1997

WRIGHT AND WRONG

At one end of Pennsylvania Avenue and at the other, the governing classes seem these days to consist of the ethicists and the ethically challenged. (They sorely need help in finding each other, and so it is only a matter of time before K Street introduces the ethics consultant: anti-consequentialist reasoning at $400 an hour.) Now it is Newt Gingrich's turn.

"With great sadness, I have filed an answer which admits to that violation.... In my name and over my signature, inaccurate, incomplete and unreliable statements were given to the committee, but I did not intend to mislead the committee." With this appeal to the confessional inclinations of American culture, Newt Gingrich attempted on December 21 to stay in the Speaker's seat. His apology was almost comical in its faux-naif quality. There is nothing more faux-naif, surely, than the admission that "I was ... in some ways naïve." He was also, he says, "overconfident." But his overconfidence was not the consequence of a human weakness. It was the consequence of a human strength, he says—of an earnest patriot's power to dream. "When I was elected to the House by my district in Georgia, I was dedicated to big ideas." Of course, so were scores and scores of congressmen and congresswomen upon whom no aspersions may be cast. Steering clear of ethics charges is not a sign that you think small. And Gingrich continued: "I was and am in love with this country and convinced of its promise." So that's it. He blurred the distinction between his college course and his political action committee, and he deceived (excuse us, his lawyer deceived) the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, because he loves his country. It was a crime of passion.

After the apologies came the apologias. They consisted essentially of the claim that Newt Gingrich is not Bill Clinton. It is hard to dispute this. Mention GOPAC and the DNC in the same sentence and you have left all sense of proportion behind. And the president has not had the decency to apologize for a thing. Instead he has sent up a fog of moralistic generalizations that obscure the truth of the matter, which is that the malfeasance against which he preaches was his own. The Clintonites think that Gingrich's troubles are a boon for their side. The Gingrichites think that Clinton's troubles are a boon for their side. Finally the Gingrichites are right. The excesses of the evangelical Gingrich are almost as nothing compared to the gutting of law and ethics by the cash-crazed, maniacally Rolodexing fund-raisers of the Clinton campaign.

Almost as nothing—but not as nothing. In moral matters, there is such a thing as small potatoes; but small potatoes are still potatoes. Either there are potatoes or there are not potatoes. And while the Clinton scandals can shame some of the Speaker's critics, they cannot exonerate the Speaker. For the public official to whom Newt Gingrich must be compared is not Bill Clinton. It is Jim Wright. Return with us to the spring of 1989. "The one exception to my willingness to conciliate and compromise," the new Republican whip wrote in *The Washington Post*, "is the area of ethics and corruption.... My record of opposing corruption goes back to my first announcement speech for Congress in 1974 in Carrollton, Ga., and continues with active involvement in anti-corruption efforts in the House. Most recently, I filed charges with the Ethics Committee in 1988 insisting that House Speaker Jim Wright be investigated. No one who voted for me to become whip thought I would suddenly give up my commitment to honest self-government. In fact, many members told me that they were going to vote for me precisely because they believe we face ethical problems in Congress and they wanted someone to confront these problems."

We understand that there are important differences between Wright's delinquency and Gingrich's delinquency. Wright enriched himself. Gingrich's funky money was not amassed for his personal benefit. It was amassed for his political benefit (or if you wish, for the benefit of his cause). But there is a sense in which the Gingrich way is worse. It is one thing to acquire a condominium sleazily and quite another to acquire power sleazily. More to the point, saints cannot withstand the revelation that they are sinners. It was Newt Gingrich who pioneered the inquisitorial style that David Bonior now practices against him. All casuistry aside, what is happening on the Hill is simple: others are judging the Speaker as he judged others. By Clinton standards, Gingrich should get away. (By Clinton standards, Clinton should get away.) By Wright standards, Gingrich must resign. He hung himself. •

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NOTEBOOK

PRAISE SHAKESPEARE, DON'T BURY HIM: For several centuries English literacy and English literature rested on three foundations: the Bible in the King James version; the classics, first in the original and then in translation; and, of course, Shakespeare. It's hard to generalize. But whatever role scripture still plays in our culture, it does little to enrich language. The pious among us increasingly seem to prefer serviceable (and tendentious) usage, and even the doubters, who say they read the Bible as narrative, are inclined to lapidary sonorities and to the politically—which is to say, gender—correct. We suspect that one reason so many black writers—from Zora Neale Hurston to Rita Dove, from Countee Cullen to James Baldwin—shine in the firmament is that theirs is the last group of Americans with an intimate enmeshment with the grand poetry of Protestantism. The classics have fared, if anything, less well than the sacred texts. Over the last few decades, they've become merely a memory, even to the humanities professoriat. So what about Shakespeare? Saul Bellow recalls, "Chicago high schools before World War II required students to memorize the great speeches of *Hamlet, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar.*" English majors read all, or most, of Shakespeare. But this, of course, is the dear, dead past. Deader than even we knew, as it turns out. As 1996 came to a close, The National Alumni Forum, an organization of university trustees and donors alarmed by the disappearance of what Irving Howe called "the common reader" and of other valued traits in the culture, released a report, reviewed by John Hollander, Professor of English at Yale and a frequent TNR contributor, Professor Roger Shattuck of Boston University, Arthur Kirsch, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and Ricardo J. Quinones, Professor of Comparative Literature at Claremont McKenna College, among others, saying that Shakespeare is joining the Bible and the classics in dodo status. At some of the country's elite institutions of learning, Shakespeare has all but been replaced: in some places by the trendy, in others by the incomprehensibly arcane, in a few by both. Of the seventy schools NAF surveyed, only one-third require English majors to take a course in Shakespeare. Meanwhile, pop-culture English courses flourish. Their topics, according to the course descriptions, include: computer games, theme parks, marketing Miss America, mail-order brides and Vanilla Ice. Paradoxically, this is a time when at least five Shakespeare plays—*Twelfth Night, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello* and *Richard III*—have recently made it into celluloid, and they are still drawing large and challenged audiences. In this respect, at least, Columbia Pictures may be more alert to what's worth saving and saying in the culture than the English faculty at Georgetown. And not only about Shakespeare. These days, Hollywood seems to be doing more to get people reading Jane Austen, Edith Wharton and Henry James than the entire Ivy League.

OLD MODEL: There is bad news again about the performance of black and Hispanic students in standardized tests in science, math and English. A report by the Education Trust, based on findings of The National Assessment of Educational Progress, details the decline in scores of minorities in comparison with white students, after some years of gradual improvement. Kati Haycock, director of the Trust, mustered the usual explanations for the reversal of trends. According to *The New York Times*, one of the explanations was that "poor and minority students are often taught by teachers not qualified in their field." This is undoubtedly true, but it is also a Catch-22. All over the country school boards are forced to do swan dives to find teachers who are of the same race and ethnicity as their most numerous and most troubled students. Unfortunately, these men and women are often unprepared both for the vocation of teaching itself and for the subject for which they have been recruited to teach. The fact is that the lure of upward mobility for gifted African Americans is now almost irresistible, and understandably so. The mantra of group role models in our schools is just that, a mantra. Most black men and women who speak, read and write English in an exemplary way do not want to be teachers. Like their white counterparts, they pursue professions of higher status and higher remuneration, and nobody should blame them.

MICKEY MOUSE: It appears China's assault on Hollywood didn't end with Beijing's November saber-rattling over Disney's production of *Kundun*, a Martin Scorsese film about the Dalai Lama. Just before Christmas, a pro-Tibet group revealed the Chinese had barred several suspected sympathizers—including Scorsese and Harrison Ford, whose wife wrote the screenplay for the Disney film—from traveling to the occupied Himalayan region. Disney's response to this latest affront: the mouse hasn't mustered a squeak. Should we be surprised? After all, when Disney decided to distribute *Kundun* in the U.S., the press swooned over the corporation's fearless, profits-be-damned stand. Disney's statement of intent to distribute, *The New York Times* gushed, "is a welcome stand at a moment when the American government and American companies seem increasingly prepared to set aside important democratic principles in hopes of expanding commerce with China." The actual statement, though, was hardly a call to arms—"We have an agreement to distribute *Kundun* domestically, and we will honor it"—and neither Chairman Michael Eisner nor former President Michael Ovitz signed it. And even during the standoff, Ovitz was making overtures to the mayor of Shanghai about a theme park in the city. Ovitz mollified him by explaining that Disney wasn't *really* involved in *Kundun*; it was just co-produced by a pesky Disney subsidiary, Touchstone Pictures. Now that Ovitz has departed the Magic Kingdom and the Chinese have revived their anti-Western intimidation, it looks like the company will have to hire another exec willing to kid-glove China for the sake of "expanding commerce." Paging Warren Christopher. •

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DEATH OF HOME RULE (I)

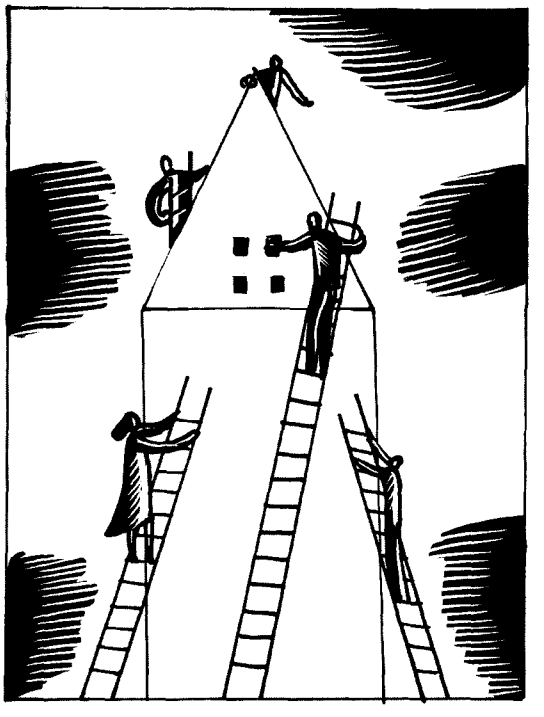
SMOKE ALARM

By Jeffrey Goldberg

I am reading an open letter slipped under my door by our neighborhood commissioner, a woman named Beth Kravetz. In the letter she reports on the local fire station at Tenley Circle on Wisconsin Avenue. The station is home to a pumper and a hook-and-ladder truck that cover a good stretch of predominantly white, mostly affluent Northwest Washington, D.C.

She writes that "true to the spirit of self-reliance," a group is forming in the virtual suburb surrounding American University to collect donations for the firehouse: among the items needed are three shower heads, eleven pillows, forty gym lockers, three space heaters, a dishwasher, three wall clocks, five air conditioners and four refrigerators.

This is a trend in Washington. During the blizzard of 1996, it became apparent that the city lacked snow plows in adequate condition to dig out the streets. The realization that our truck shortage might extend to fire trucks is obviously more disconcerting. So across D.C., Washingtonians are taking matters into their own hands. In Georgetown, residents recently donated mattresses to their firehouse; in Chevy Chase, neighbors donated an extension ladder for their local engine company—the ladder is used to reach second stories of houses, which were unreachable by previously ladderless firefighters. Around the city, residents are preparing for a repeat of last winter, when they pooled their resources to clear their streets and alleys of snow.



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I had assumed that this outpouring of private philanthropy was best explained by public sector incompetence of near-heroic proportions. To borrow from Nathan Glazer, Washington is the apotheosis of a city that has stopped doing the things cities do well—putting out fires, picking up trash—to do the things cities don't do well, such as building an all-encompassing welfare and patronage state. But I was put straight by Alvin T. Carter, the Fire Department spokesman, who explained to me that the department doesn't need the donations but accepts them in the spirit of community.

"It is not necessary for the community to do this," he says. "But this is helping the neighborhoods make connections and build community involvement. The Fire Department is going through some tough fiscal times, and the community responds to the tough times by wanting to identify little things they can do. There are people who out of the goodness of their hearts want to contribute, and we're trying to accommodate them."

So the Fire Department doesn't actually need donated refrigerators and ladders?

"It isn't bad for us to have this material in reserve," Carter says. It is the wealthier neighborhoods west of Rock Creek Park that do much of the donating, he explains; this frees up equipment purchased by the department itself for use in some of the poorer neighborhoods. Carter says the department can find within its $106 million budget the money to look after its firefighters, who work twenty-four-hour shifts and who therefore eat and sleep in their firehouses. "We differentiate between two levels of donations. We provide things like mattresses and refrigerators and ovens. But the department does not buy certain things for them, such as newspaper subscriptions and condiments."

All of this is news to the firefighters at the Tenley station, who told me the department regularly fails to provide them not only with condiments, but with heat, light and working fire equipment. Until late November, a broken boiler forced the Tenley firefighters to place fans in front of their gas oven to blow heat through the house. I asked one of the firefighters why he and the others didn't die from the fumes. "The house is very drafty," he said, "so the wind kind of blows them right out."

Even when the boiler is working, the Tenley station is in terrible condition. I visited recently, without official escort, and the firefighters were eager to catalog the station's deficiencies—on condition that I not use their names. "When we complain too much," one said, "they threaten to shut the house down."

Big rat holes pockmark the firehouse grounds. There is a sinkhole, covered with metal sheeting, in the bay that holds the 29,000-pound hook-and-ladder truck. One firefighter said he is afraid the truck will soon fall into the sinkhole. The truck itself is 18 years old and looks fatigued. "This truck wouldn't pass D.C. vehicle inspection," this same firefighter said. "It has no bum-

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pers, no marking lights. I'm afraid the engine won't turn over one day." On the day I visited the Tenley house, three of the city's sixteen ladder trucks were out of service, and, on November 7, *The Washington Post* reported that five trucks were not working. Days later, Ray Sneed, president of the firefighters' union, told me that not one of the city's three heavy rescue vehicles was operational.

Half the lights in the Tenley house are broken, as are many of the windows. The house's electrical system, firefighters said, does not meet D.C.'s fire code, and the fire poles don't meet Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards. They are loose and uncloseted, and diesel fumes from the garage float into the sleeping quarters through the pole holes. (Carter told me that no pole holes were uncloseted, except perhaps at one firehouse in Georgetown, and that the Tenley station is "in good condition.")

The fire department is one of several city agencies still under Mayor Marion Barry's control, more or less. While Barry was in Asia on a recent trade mission, the city's federally appointed financial control authority, which is quickly dropping any pretense that it isn't actually running the city, appointed a retired general to fix the anarchic school system (see Erik Wemple, "Democracy's Discontent," page 20). But the fire department has yet to get its own general. A number of the firefighters I spoke with, most of whom are black and many of whom long ago moved their families to the suburbs, say they wouldn't mind new, federally appointed leadership. The department may avoid a takeover, but only if it avoids tragedy. A fire last June at the Treasury Department was ill-handled, but it led to no loss of life. But it would take, of course, just a minor tragedy at a Senate office building or at the White House to spur a takeover.

For the moment, though, the department remains understaffed and poorly equipped; Carter says new firefighting equipment should arrive in the city "as early" as 1998. Material shortfalls will be made up, for now, by community groups like the one in my neighborhood, which are engaged, in essence, in an act of double-taxation. "We support it like a volunteer firehouse, and then we pay taxes on top of that to pay for it," Kravetz says.

One of the things you learn when you move to upper Northwest D.C. is to donate money to the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad, a volunteer ambulance operation in the neighboring suburbs. I asked a firefighter at the Tenley fire station if, in his own emergency, he would prefer to receive help from BCC, as it is known, or from the D.C. Fire Department's ambulance service.

"BCC, definitely," he said. "The only problem is, they only have ambulances, not fire apparatus, so in a fire it's D.C." The firefighter, who lives in a suburb himself, smiles. "That's too bad for you, I guess."

JEFFREY GOLDBERG is a contributing writer at *The New York Times Magazine.*

DEATH OF HOME RULE (II)

IN LOCO PARENTIS

By Sydney Freedberg Jr.

Three years ago, at Ben W. Murch Elementary School in Northwest Washington, D.C., water runoff from the playground poured through a disused boiler pipe and shorted out the boiler's electrical panel, shutting off the school's heat. The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) dispatched a repair team, who fixed the boiler—with tools borrowed from a Murch parent who is an engineer—and solved the leak, sort of, by sawing the pipe in half so it would flood a less vital area of the basement. When asked for a more permanent solution, Murch parent Sally Gresham recalls, one of the workers responded: "I'm an electrician—I don't touch that." Adds Gresham, "They never came back." A group of parents eventually jury-rigged a drain themselves.

Drain pipes are one thing; teachers, one might expect, are another. But four months ago, the new layer of review spawned by the federally appointed financial control board caused the inefficient-to-begin-with DCPS bureaucracy to grind to a halt, leaving two new Murch teachers unpaid for six weeks. As she does every year, Principal Mary Gill walked the *via dolorosa* of D.C. administrative offices trying to get her staff paid; but this year, it wasn't enough. Parents again stepped in. The Home and School Association (Murch's PTA), of which Gresham is co-president, advanced its own money so the teachers could get by.

In a city where, as the control board report *Children in Crisis* recently pointed out, "the longer students stay in the District's public school system, the less likely they are to succeed," Murch and its sister schools in Northwest Washington's mostly white and affluent Ward 3 are the happy exception. Their test scores tower above those in the rest of D.C. Murch is as yet the District's only public elementary school to win accreditation from the prestigious Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. And while other schools hemorrhage students—average elementary school enrollment is 26 percent below capacity—Murch and other Ward 3 schools are jammed.

Is the system giving Ward 3 special treatment? Hardly. Ward 3 goes without the special aid funneled to schools in D.C.'s poorer regions, and its school buildings include some of Washington's oldest—Murch, never thoroughly renovated, was built sixty-six years ago. Murch works for the same reason the boiler does: parents.

Sure, moms and dads chip in at schools everywhere—holding bake sales, chaperoning field trips—but in D.C.

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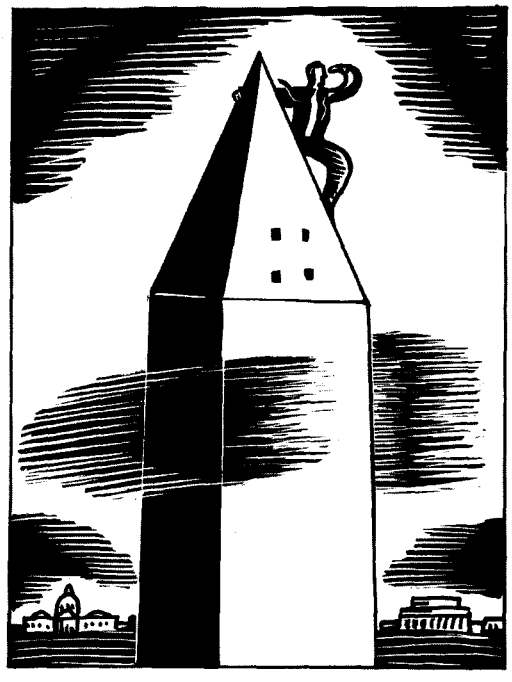
this pleasantly enriching voluntarism has given way to something a step above. Literally. "We're having to get up on top of our buildings and take balls and leaves off and put [meshes] on so the gutters don't get clogged," Gresham explains. In 1994, when a court order threatened to shut down Murch (and other schools) for fire-code violations, parents scraped paint and hauled trash so the school could stay open. More recently, they have fixed closets, made cabinets and donated the parts and labor to renovate the teachers' bathroom. Even more extraordinarily, Murch's Home and School Association pays the salaries for three of seven classroom aides at the school, a part-time nurse, a library aide and a clerical assistant for the guidance counselor. "Parents here once provided the cream," says Principal Gill. "Now many of the things they're providing are really core."

Compare this to the situation in nearby suburban Maryland, where, according to a spokesman for the Montgomery County PTA, parents are advised not to get personally involved with school repairs unless "there is an immediate danger to the children." In affluent Montgomery County, the PTA's role is "to advocate for the children ... so that the services are provided through the government and through the public school system." But in Montgomery County the system works. "You have to get involved here," says Don Reeves, a Murch parent, sometime mayoral candidate and newly elected Board of Education member, "because there is no safety-net any more."



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Of course, the families of Northwest Washington—comfortable, two-career households, for the most part—can afford to be generous. The Home and School Association charges parents between $100 and $500 a year and counts on a 67 percent collection rate. Its projected 1996-97 school year revenue (which also includes money from auctions and the like) is $144,734. All of which points up the central paradox of schools like Murch. "My wife and I are both products of public schools," says Gresham's husband, Steve. "We would just hate to see it where all the haves go to private school and all the have-nots go to public school. That would be incredibly divisive." Murch works because the parents are passionately committed, not just to education, but to *public* education's egalitarian promise. Yet their very commitment makes public education less public, or at least less egalitarian. It's an irony of which they are well aware. "We're upset about having to do this, and often at many of the PTA's meetings, the issue is how far is too much," says Reeves. "When is it no longer a public school?" Another active Murch parent, Ed Gold, agonizes: "It's a wonderful partnership, but it's horrible that it has to be done; and, really, when you look at the real social implications citywide, it's wrong ... that an affluent community is going to be able to fill the gap, or at least have a shot at it, whereas an impoverished neighborhood has much less of a chance."

The social implications Gold is talking about go to the heart of the failure of Washington's effort to govern itself. Washington has been officially a majority-black city since 1960, and, up until 1954, the city's schools were racially segregated, separate and vastly unequal, with the schools in poor black neighborhoods shamefully inferior to those in the wealthier, whiter parts of town. One of the simple dreams of the political activists who won home rule for Washington was that one day the city would boast an integrated school system that provided the same level of free, excellent care for all children, black and white. Instead, there is the phenomenon of Murch. The school does have a substantial non-white population, and it even accepts pupils from outside the neighborhood, but the average student remains white and prosperous. And the fact that the parents of Murch have partially privatized the school in order to give their children a quality of education unavailable to students at the city's poorer, blacker schools means that, to a real degree, a de facto system of separate but unequal education has been reinstitutionalized.

But, as uncomfortable as this knowledge makes some Murch parents, de-privatizing their school is not the answer. Forcing the parents to stop their self-help work would simply lower the quality of Ward 3 schools to match the rest of the city's, imposing a sorry and purely formal equality—the kind of Solomonic justice that leaves the landscape littered with halves of babies. Real equality, of course, would come from making all D.C. schools work. Several Murch parents, notably Reeves and Ward 3 City Council member Kathy Patterson, have entered D.C. politics with just that objective, albeit with mixed success. To get real reform, argues Murch parent Stuart Butler, "this system has to be broken and put back together."

That process may have finally begun—with the federal government stepping in to save D.C. public education from D.C. For years, the District's failure to provide essential city services has forced the community to step in and organize from below; now the federal government has come in from above. The casualty is another long-cherished liberal ideal—home rule—but even Reeves, disempowered on his election night, is ready to accept the change. As Butler's wife, Jamie, puts it, "many of us are less concerned about the home rule issues than about getting our schools fixed and our community fixed." •

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DEATH OF HOME RULE (III)

A CAPITAL CRIME

By Robyn Gearey

It was a late night at the office on Friday, September 20 for Chet Levitt and colleague Michael Kane. After finishing up around 11:30 p.m., they went out for pizza and then stopped at The Front Page, a nearby bar. Kane left the bar around 12:45 a.m., Levitt stayed. At 2:27 a.m., Levitt stopped at an ATM just off Logan Circle to withdraw money. At 2:30, D.C. police responded to a report of a shooting in an alley three blocks from the ATM. Levitt had been shot twice, and died at the scene.

D.C. paramedics took Levitt's body to the city morgue, where it lay for three days before any representative of the District police department notified his next of kin—despite the fact that Levitt was carrying a wallet containing his D.C. driver's license and an old New York license that gave his parents' address. The D.C. police did not visit Levitt's apartment or leave any messages on his telephone answering machine. In fact, the D.C. police never did figure out how to find and notify Levitt's family based on the identification in the corpse's pocket. It was not until Monday, September 23, when a friend of Levitt's filed a missing persons report, that the penny dropped. An officer investigating the missing persons report accompanied the concerned friend to Levitt's apartment, determined he had not been there for several days, and reported this information back to headquarters. There, at last, someone thought of the man in the morgue. A homicide sergeant came to the apartment and informed Levitt's friend of the murder. Levitt's friend gave the sergeant the name and telephone number of Levitt's brother.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY RUSSO FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

The first step in any homicide investigation, apart from identifying the deceased, is to gather eyewitness reports of the crime. This the police did promptly, at the scene of the crime. Detectives took statements from two witnesses. The first was a woman who lived in a house that backed onto the alley where the murder was committed. While she did see Levitt stagger and fall, she did not see the shooting itself, or the shooter. The second witness was a homeless woman who had been walking down the alley when the shooting occurred. According to the first witness, who observed the police interviewing the homeless woman, this witness initially told homicide detectives that she had seen the shooting, and gave a description of it. Then, apparently growing fearful, she changed her story and said she hadn't really seen much at all. Incredibly, the detectives did not press her further, and allowed her to wander off into the night. Friends of Levitt say the police have told them that they have since lost track of the woman, their only witness to the crime.

Weeks passed with no apparent movement on the case. Phone calls to the police from Levitt's family and friends were met with "indifference and the downright expression that they were being put upon," said Diane Seltzer, one of Levitt's friends. Twice, Levitt's brother Adam has managed to reach the detective assigned to the case, Todd Amis, and had brief telephone conversations with him. But, Adam Levitt says, Amis has never initiated a single call to any family member and has never returned any of their numerous messages.

The little information the police did give the family raises even more questions about the handling of the case. One detective told Levitt's brother that the victim was shot once, not twice. On the day they were notified of his murder, several of Levitt's friends were told by detectives that there was one female witness. The next day, Amis told Levitt's brother there were no witnesses. A few days later, the police said there were several witnesses. It gets worse. Despite the existence of an eyewitness, no sketch of the suspect was made. It took over a month—and a suggestion from Adam Levitt—before detectives obtained the videotape from the ATM machine, which showed someone standing behind Levitt. The video was sent to the FBI for further analysis, and was not returned until late December, over three months after the murder. Detective Amis talked with the manager at The Front Page, where Levitt was drinking before his death, but he never spoke with the bartender, who knew Levitt and was certainly among the last to see him alive.

When Levitt's boss, David Cashdan, called the homicide branch a few days after the murder to inquire

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about the investigation, an officer told him no one would be able to get to the case until the following week, when the officers assigned to it came off night duty. Otherwise, the officer explained, they would have to be paid for overtime, which the department couldn't afford.

The Levitt case was in a sense an aberration. Levitt, a civil rights lawyer, was a 30-year-old, white professional shot in a downtown area apparently by a street thug acting at random impulse. He was not, in other words, like most big-city murder victims, a young black man shot by another young black man in a dangerous part of town. (In Washington, 84 percent of last year's murder victims were black men; only 2 percent were white men.) This is precisely the kind of crime that sends middle-class people fleeing to the suburbs, and for this reason it is the sort of crime police departments tend to regard as a must-solve. If the D.C. homicide branch can't get its act together on this sort of case, what hope is there that it will deal effectively with the more routine slaughter of the poor, or with lesser crimes?

Not much. In the District of Columbia, where the violent crime rate is triple the national average, the fundamental processes of law enforcement have simply broken down. A properly functioning police system should clear homicide cases—that is, a suspect is arrested and indicted—at a rate of at least 75 percent. The homicide clearance rate in the District is at the moment hovering around the terrifyingly low level of 30 percent, which means that in 70 percent of killings, no one is ever indicted, much less convicted. No other major police department in America approaches this level of cataclysmic failure. Even the problem-plagued Los Angeles Police Department, which must cope with large-scale and chronic gang warfare, clears 54 percent of its homicides.

And the failure of the homicide branch is merely a part of the whole. With 663 officers per 100,000 residents, Washington has almost three times more cops than the national average. Despite this, its Metropolitan Police Department barely functions. Until the mid-1970s, D.C.'s police force was regarded as one of the best in the country. But due in part to the dramatic increase in drug-related violence in the 1980s, and in part to a hiring system in which an applicant's race and residency often outweigh his abilities, the department's effectiveness has declined drastically over the past decade. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in response to pressure to increase the force to combat rising crime rates, standards for recruits were lowered so far that the department hired many people with criminal records. As a result, in 1994, *Washington City Paper* reported that 170 Metropolitan Police Department officers were "under indictment or investigation by the U.S. Attorney's Office."

The department has also been devastated by funding cuts. A victim of D.C.'s perpetual financial troubles, the department has had to cut salaries and benefits, and officers often do not have the equipment to do their jobs effectively. Offices with computers remain a rarity. Many police cruisers operate with broken headlights, and some don't even have radios. In fact, the officer who initially investigated the missing persons report on Levitt had to borrow a cell phone from Levitt's friend to call headquarters.

Other branches of the criminal justice system critical to the process of solving crimes have also failed. Police investigations are often held up by the D.C. Medical Examiner's Office, where, *The Washington Post* recently reported, there is a backlog of 1,400 toxicology tests, tests that need to be done before examiners can complete the autopsy reports critical to homicide investigations.

One result of all this is a kind of judicial systems failure. As the District's chief prosecutor, U.S. Attorney Eric Holder Jr. has publicly complained that, even when the police manage to make arrests, prosecutors often find themselves losing in court because of sloppy documentation by officers, irresponsible handling of evidence, failure of officers to appear in court when called and so on.

Another result is a contribution to the breakdown of democracy itself. In recent months, Washingtonians have begun calling for the removal of one of the most basic and most cherished rights, the right to police themselves. There is talk of turning over management of the police department to an outside group similar to the financial control board that oversees D.C.'s budget, and this idea meets with no cries of outrage.

There is something else about the Levitt case. It isn't just that the police don't seem to care much anymore about murder. The press doesn't seem to either. When the city's murder rate first started to rise in the 1980s, the local television evening news shows kept a daily tally of the year's murders to date. That tally has long since disappeared; now most homicides are mentioned only briefly, if at all. None of the local television news programs covered Levitt's murder in any detail. Of the city's two newspapers, *The Washington Times* never even reported the crime, and *The Washington Post*, which sent a reporter to the scene of the murder, ran no first-day story. A *Post* assignment editor said the story was "just not newsworthy enough" to make it into the final edition. The *Post* ran just one small item, more than a week after the crime, a note that Levitt's friends were posting a reward for information on the case.

As of this writing, the Levitt case is still wide open and clueless. The odds are against ever solving it. Detective Amis was on leave and could not be reached for comment, but his superior, Lieutenant Rodney Parks, answered questions about the case. Even Parks admits that the police are short on leads. The case will remain open indefinitely, he assures, but adds, "eventually, you reach a point where you exhaust all your options." In the nation's capital, that point seems to have been reached. •

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MAKING SAUSAGE

By William Powers

No sooner had the jury in Greensboro, North Carolina, reached its decision in the landmark case of *Food Lion* v. *ABC* than the guard dogs of the First Amendment were in the streets, howling in their usual fashion. The verdict was "abominable," said Jane Kirtley, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. And Kirtley added, in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, "The court of law is not the place to deal with issues like the ethics of newsgathering." The press itself was naturally appalled. The jury's decision was "a bad ruling" that "promises to have ominous implications for the future of aggressive investigative journalism," declared the editorialists of the Fort Lauderdale *Sun-Sentinel*. And *USA Today* reported on the possible "chilling effect" of the December 20 decision.

What do they all hate so about this verdict? First, that it was against ABC. Whenever one of the big news organizations loses a prominent legal challenge to its work—in this case, a famously graphic "PrimeTime Live" report alleging that Food Lion supermarkets were selling rotten meat—it's generally received as a loss for all. The second reason for the howls: rather than taking on the substance of the piece and suing for libel, which is difficult to prove, Food Lion challenged the *methods* ABC used to get the story. "PrimeTime Live" had sent two producers to work undercover in the meat and deli departments of Food Lion stores in North and South Carolina. The producers went in equipped with those tiny hidden cameras and microphones that the magazine shows have increasingly come to depend upon. There they recorded shocking scenes of what appeared to be rampant unsanitary food-handling and aggressive efforts by Food Lion to sell spoiled chicken, gamy lunchmeat and other unsavories. Food Lion argued that, in employing such deceptive reporting techniques, ABC had committed fraud, trespassing and breach of something called "duty of loyalty"—that is, when the undercover producers used their supermarket jobs to prepare the TV report, they were being disloyal to their employer, Food Lion.

Food Lion's strategy thus explored unchartered territory in the wars between the media and the corporate world. Having won with it, the press defenders worry, Food Lion has opened up a dangerous new front. And, indeed, *Food Lion* v. *ABC* is only the most prominent of a whole new wave of court challenges to investigative TV journalism. Just two days before the Food Lion verdict, a federal jury in Florida delivered a $10 million libel judgment against ABC, in a case that grew out of an investigative segment on "20/20." There are other suits pending against the three networks, many involving undercover magazine pieces.

But the defenders of the media's right to investigate and report are to some degree missing the point. They argue as if we live in a world that is dominated by conscientious, creditable journalism and threatened by these anti-press verdicts. But we don't, certainly not where television news is concerned. One careful look at the ubiquitous magazine shows is all one needs to see why there are so many of these lawsuits, and why juries are coming down against the newsgatherers. The news standards of these shows and the ethical standards that guide them as they gather that news (which is what the Food Lion case was about) are often terribly low. And as the magazines have proliferated and the number of story slots that must be filled has grown—NBC's "Dateline" is on three nights a week—they are getting lower.

Much of what the magazine shows do—particularly in the sob sister line—they do well. But when the shows attempt crusading journalism, the investigation of possible wrongdoing by public and private individuals and organizations, they run into trouble. Like the tearjerker pieces, these stories are ratings magnets. Otherwise, though, they are an entirely different journalistic animal. What really matters in investigative news is not the footage but the facts, which are often elusive and nuanced. There are almost always conflicting versions to sort out, and the truth is rarely so simple that it can be conveyed in, say, five minutes of undercover video images. Yet, the undercover video footage is precisely what draws the viewers, and so, more and more, the magazine shows have come to rely on the very technique that works least well in conveying a complicated truth. And the heavy use of undercover footage doesn't just fail to convey a full truth; it works actively to distort the truth. The footage, with its grainy cinema verité quality and its you-are-there evocations of FBI stings and bank robbery films, carries an associative suggestion of guilt powerful enough to override even scrupulously evenhanded writing.

Which leads us to ABC's report on Food Lion. When it was broadcast in November 1992, the "PrimeTime Live" piece seemed a model for the sort of journalism television should practice. I watched it at the time, nauseated but impressed. The twenty-two-minute piece was brilliantly stitched together, especially in the way it built its case against Food Lion, layer upon damning layer. Diane Sawyer said ABC had an amazing seventy current and former Food Lion employees on the record, attesting to the company's abuses. But, unsatisfied with mere interviews, she said, "PrimeTime Live" had gone undercover to see for itself. Cut to those scandalous meat-department scenes: a Food Lion worker pouring barbecue sauce over what we were told was bad chicken, to mask the spoilage before putting it out for sale; another

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NEWS RELEASE

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ATTN: News Editor

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NEW REPUBLIC FANS FLAMES OF ANTI-CATHOLICISM

The cover article of the December 30th edition of the **New Republic** contains a piece by Jacob Heilbrunn that alleges there is a growing war between Catholic and Jewish conservatives. The article, "Neocon v. Theocon," maintains that Catholic intellectuals have alienated their Jewish neoconservative friends by pushing for a Thomistic understanding of American democracy. The piece is in large measure a response to a recently published symposium in **First Things**.

According to Heilbrunn, the "mostly Catholic intellectuals" who comprise the theocons "are attempting to construct a Christian theory of politics that directly threatens the entire neoconservative philosophy." He then adds that this venture is seen by some neocons (none is identified) as one which "directly threatens Jews." The public philosophy that is ascribed to Catholic writers is labeled "not so much anti-American as un-American."

Catholic League president William Donohue had this to say about the article:

"It is amazing that such a highly regarded publication as the **New Republic** would stoop to the level of Catholic baiting. Heilbrunn chooses a symposium in which three of the five contributors are non-Catholic (curiously, one of the wives is identified as a 'staunch Catholic'; it is not mentioned that one of the Catholic men is married to a Jewish woman) to argue that these articles are symbolic of some nefarious Catholic theory. Moreover, the organ that published the symposium isn't even Catholic, it's an interdenominational journal.

"By charging that a few Catholic scholars like Father Richard John Neuhaus and Robert George are threatening Jews, or that their ideas are 'un-American,' is as untrue as it is unethical. Indeed, these two men have been leaders in fostering better relations between Catholics and Jews. What the **New Republic** is doing is promoting division among conservative intellectuals, not reporting on it. That it has chosen the club of anti-Catholicism to do so is reprehensible.

"There are millions of Americans of all faiths who believe that we have an imperial judiciary, and some of them fear that the courts are undermining the legitimacy of the political order. This conclusion is debatable, but it is no more grounded in Catholicism than it is Judaism. Worse, the attempt to brand it as un-American and Catholic-inspired has a familiar demagogic ring to it.

"The **New Republic** is not generally given to bigotry. It is hoped this incident does not signal a change from its past record of excellence."

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Food Lion employee smelling rancid rice pudding; and so on. The piece even explained why such horrors went on: (1) Food Lion, ruthless about its profit margins, was determined to sell every scrap of food it could; and (2) The company required employees to perform each of their tasks under impossible time constraints, leaving them no choice but to put in all kinds of unpaid (and illegal) overtime and to cut corners in sanitation.

The story felt airtight, so much so that, brimming with consumerist indignation, I initiated a personal boycott of Food Lion, which at the time the piece aired was the nation's most profitable grocery-store chain, with more than 1,000 stores. There are two Food Lions near my house, and I have not been inside either one. Others apparently felt as I did: after the story aired, Food Lion's business, and its stock value, crashed. The piece won a top award from Investigative Reporters and Editors, the leading professional organization for investigative journalists.

So when the trial began several weeks ago, and Food Lion's aggressive public relations operation started faxing out its side of the story, I was intrigued. As part of the suit, Food Lion had obtained the full forty-five hours of hidden-camera videotape shot by the "PrimeTime Live" producers, of which only about ten minutes wound up in the segment. In a "backgrounder" fax, Food Lion claimed that "the unedited footage provides an extraordinary look at how a network news magazine can create false impressions," and that "ABC producers and editors used a combination of staged events and selective editing to fit a preconceived story line and systematically fabricate a story to deceive the public." In one specific instance, Food Lion claims that when ABC used hidden-camera footage of a Food Lion employee talking about how she had cooked a batch of out-of-date chicken, it edited out the part where she says she brought the matter up with her manager, who directed her to throw the chicken away. Food Lion even claimed the ABC producers had staged entire scenes (shades of the infamous truck explosion staged by "Dateline"). In one case found in the outtakes shown by Food Lion in court, an ABC employee sold a piece of moldy kielbasa sausage to two other ABC employees, while both parties to the transaction filmed it with hidden cameras. "'PrimeTime' staged nothing," Sawyer said in the piece. According to Food Lion, one of the ABC producers can be heard on the tapes muttering "damn" and "oh shit" into her microphone when she observes Food Lion workers getting rid of bad meat and cleaning up the meat department that ABC would later present as a little shop of sanitation horrors.

I haven't seen the outtakes; Food Lion said they couldn't share them with me as long as they were evidence in the trial (which was still going on, as to the damages ABC must pay, when this column went to press). The company may be lying about the tapes, or exaggerating their significance. But the outtakes were aired in court, and this presumably played some part in the jury's decision.

At the heart of the case was a First Amendment dilemma that has not yet been fully resolved by the courts: May a news organization break the law and deceive in order to get an important story? The jury's decision pertained to this fairly narrow question, and was a vote against special media privileges. But, by showing the outtakes, Food Lion's lawyers implicitly addressed a larger question, whether certain practices of the media deceive the consumers of news. And this implicit argument may have helped Food Lion win.

Bad news for the press, perhaps. But it could also be a salutary slap in the face for the magazine shows. Since the trial began, I have watched "PrimeTime Live"'s Food Lion piece many times, and with each viewing it becomes a little less convincing. This is not to say ABC wasn't onto a story. Less than a year after the piece aired, the Labor Department found what it called "widespread and extensive" violations of labor laws at Food Lion stores, including the same unpaid-overtime practices alleged by ABC. Food Lion settled with the government for $16.2 million, a record for this sort of claim. Food Lion, which is a nonunion company, says its "avowed enemy," the United Food and Commercial Workers of America, not only prompted the Labor investigation but tipped off the ABC producers and helped them put together the piece. This may be true but it doesn't in itself argue against the ABC story; some of the best journalism originates with ax-grinding sources. The question is whether ABC really got the essential story it claimed to have, and I'm not so sure it did.

The unpaid-overtime allegation, effectively confirmed by the Labor investigation, was not the main thrust of the "PrimeTime Live" segment. What the show put up front, and what it hyped in promos leading up to the broadcast, was the sexy stuff: that in the back rooms of hundreds of Food Lion stores across the southeastern U.S., people are working diligently every day to sell rotten and potentially dangerous meat to consumers.

There were several problems with this claim. One is that there was no evidence of any sickness resulting from these practices. Sawyer concedes this in the piece, but goes on to add that food poisoning cases are often unreported and hard to trace. Another problem is a disconnect between what half a dozen apostate Food Lion workers say in the formal interviews aired in the piece, and what is shown in the undercover footage. The workers indicate it was common practice at Food Lion to erase the sell-by dates on meat with fingernail polish remover, but "PrimeTime Live" didn't show any video of that. The workers say they soaked ham and fish in Clorox bleach, to remove the odor and appearance of spoilage, but again there is no evidence of this in the hidden-camera clips. The workers say managers take bad food out of dumpsters and put it back on the shelves—again, no video proof.

What we do see in the footage is some evidence of unsanitary practices that were violations of Food Lion rules, and probably not unique to Food Lion stores. To cover itself on this question, "PrimeTime Live" came up with an artful fig leaf. "You're probably wondering if

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these practices go on at other chains," Sawyer said. "We can't answer that. The people you saw on camera who now work for other grocery stores say it doesn't happen where they work now. But our investigation was limited to Food Lion."

ABC says it stands by its Food Lion story, and may appeal the decision. I hope it does. If the story stays alive, and more of the evidence emerges for public scrutiny, this case may offer a rare glimpse inside the TV magazine business. These hidden-camera investigations are costly, and it's hard for producers to go back to the office and say the sorts of things newspaper reporters tell their editors all the time: "the story didn't really pan out," or "it's not as simple as we thought." Unlike newspapers, the networks don't have subscribers who will be back for the next edition no matter what, and they can't bury a less-than-fab story on page B19. They have to draw in a large audience for every show, or risk losing ratings and advertisers. And they do so by painting in broad, sensational strokes. In the case of Food Lion, it now seems ABC may have taken a perfectly respectable and interesting story about a supermarket chain with questionable labor policies and pumped it up to win higher ratings.

In the same year it ran the Food Lion story, "PrimeTime Live" ran another piece alleging consumers were being ripped off by electronics repair businesses. For that piece, ABC employees posed as customers with broken electronic equipment. The owner of one repair business sued ABC for libel, and the jury decided against ABC. According to a *New York Times* report, that jury awarded only $1 in damages, but attached to their verdict an unusual note to ABC. It suggested that the network take "another look at PrimeTime's goals and objectives" as a news show, and said: "Be sure that the kind of reporting coming from this show is what you, as an outstanding news organization would put your name to." Exactly. •

Ebonics: it's worse than you think.

SPEECH THERAPY

By Jacob Heilbrunn

"Few have abilities so much needed by the rest of the world as to be caressed on their own terms."
—Dr. Johnson, "Appropriate Diction"

On December 18, 1996, the Oakland school board unanimously approved a two-page resolution declaring black English a formal language. The resolution stated that the district's 28,000 African American students are bilingual and need to be taught in their mother tongue: Ebonics. "African Language Systems," the resolution noted, "are genetically based and not a dialect of English." After the vote, Board Director Toni Cook said: "I think we made a hell of a good beginning. What we did was go offensive and quit saying there's something wrong with a majority of the children."

A chorus of voices quickly denounced the Oakland school board. On NBC's "Meet the Press," Jesse Jackson said, "This is an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace. It's teaching down to our children." In a December 24 editorial, *The New York Times* decried "LINGUISTIC CONFUSION." Secretary of Education Richard Riley declared that using federal funds for "black English or Ebonics is not permitted."

In all the uproar, however, one detail is being overlooked: when the Oakland school board announced Ebonics was the "primary language" of African Americans, it was simply codifying accepted practice. Ebonics programs have for years been an official and widespread part of the education of black children in California. What the Oakland school board did may be appalling, but it was in no way novel. Ebonics programs have been a feature of California schools attended by black students since 1989, when Thomas Payzant, then superintendent of schools in San Diego and later an assistant education secretary under Clinton, approved the creation of four pilot schools that taught Ebonics. Payzant's test program has since been expanded to include all San Diego schools. The Pomona Unified School District endorses the teaching of Ebonics. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, Noma LeMoine, who is writing a textbook of Ebonics and has instructed over 2,000 teachers, is director of L.A.'s Ebonics program. LeMoine's 6-year-old Ebonics program is called the Language Development Program for African American students; it receives $3 million a year from the L.A. School District, is used at thirty-one schools, and reaches around 25,000 students. In the Bay area, Oakland already has programs in twenty-six schools that train teachers to understand black English; and Wade W. Nobles runs a College of Ethnic Studies on the San Francisco State University campus that

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trains teachers from around California in Ebonics epistemology. The methods used in all of these programs are outlined in Evelyn Baker Dandy's 1991 *Black Communications*: they include using "call-response" techniques, in which the OnT (time) method encourages students to praise the teacher for being timely in his or her recitation by affirming "shonuff," "ooooo-weeee!"; and favors group "mumble reading" so as to avoid embarrassing individual children about pronunciation.

Ebonics is not just a bit of amateur crackpotism. It is professional crackpotism, well within the pedagogical mainstream. And Ebonics was not schemed up by a few opportunistic, marginal pols in a desperately poor city but stems from decades of scholarship conducted at America's most distinguished universities. The Oakland School District can point to a rich corpus of academic work on which to base its decision.

The linguist Robert L. Williams coined the term in his 1975 book *Ebonics: the true language of Black folks* by combining the words ebony and phonics. Williams and his fellow Ebonologists—who include John Baugh, John R. Rickford, Peter Sells and Tom Wasow of the Stanford University linguistics department, William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania, Ralph Fasold of Georgetown University, Walt Wolfram of North Carolina State University, Geneva Smitherman of Michigan State University, Lisa Green of the University of Texas at Austin and Orlando Taylor of Howard University, who is a consultant to the Oakland school board—trace the origins of Ebonics to African languages such as Yoruba, Ewe, Fula, Igbo and Mandinka. The consensus among these linguists is that black English is a legitimate linguistic system with a highly complex grammar and syntax that can be identified as coming out of Africa and the Caribbean.

Over the past decade, as these theories of African culture have moved from the university into the public school, the consequences have been profound. By providing Ebonics with a patina of legitimacy, these scholars have bolstered the efforts of a number of black educators to utilize what are viewed as the skills of "rap" and "playin' the dozens" (black male verbal confrontation) in the classroom. The purveyors of Ebonics have picked up enough academic argot to maintain that, since all reality is socially constructed, there is no such thing as a "good" or a "bad" version of English. On the contrary, demands that black children conform to white bourgeois notions of "good" English amount to an attempt to destroy African American identity and culture.

The historical work that laid the foundations for Ebonics began in the 1960s. The key issue was, and remains, whether Africans acquired the English of other groups they came into contact with, or whether an African- and Caribbean-based black English emerged among the slaves. In other words, did the slaves adapt the language of the oppressor or did they outwit him by creating their own language based on their own traditions? The contemporary political implications are clear enough.

Until the 1960s, the first view was dominant: black Americans learned their English from the English. In his still-standard 1925 two-volume work *English Language in America*, the linguist George Philip Krapp ascribed black English to Old English: "As the Negroes imported into America came from many unrelated tribes ... it is reasonably safe to say that not a single detail of Negro pronunciation or Negro syntax can be proved to have any other than an English origin." Black English was seen as an embarrassing relic of the past, and linguists devised remedial programs to correct it.

With the rise of Black Power, a new generation of linguists who might be called "creolists" set about overturning the received wisdom. In 1967, William Stewart asserted that the pidgin English slaves had learned on the west African coast evolved into its own language on Caribbean and American soil: "this form of language," wrote Stewart, "became so well established as the principal medium of communication between Negro slaves in the British colonies that it was passed on as a creole language to succeeding generations of the New World Negroes, for whom it was their native tongue."

The idea is that a common "bridge-language" had developed in eighteenth-century coastal west Africa itself—between languages such as Ewe, Twi, Mende, Mandingo, Igbo, Nupe, Mossi and Kanuri. Since slaves were isolated when brought to America, they maintained this indigenous language to create a secret code behind the backs of their masters. "Needless to say, didn't nobody sit down and decide, consciously and deliberately," wrote Geneva Smitherman of Michigan State in her 1977 *Talkin and Testifyin*, "that this was the way it was gon be—languages, pidgins, creoles, dialects was all like Topsy: they jes grew." The language that emerged from pidgin is known among linguists as Creole. Though it adopted English words, it retained the structure of west African languages. Hence the special patterns of Ebonics.

Some of the west African features governing black English cited by Smitherman are: repetition of noun subject with pronoun—"My father, he work there"—no tense indicated in verb—"I know it good when he ask me"—and no consonant pairs—"jus" for "just" and "men" for "mend." The linguist John R. Rickford, who was born in Guyana and who teaches a course at Stanford University titled "African-American Vernacular English," agrees. According to Rickford, "I found that people are using as a habitual marker 'does' and 'does be' which are precisely forms used in the Caribbean. People would say, 'He does be sick,' 'He does be walkin.' A lot of times it was highly reduced. 'He be sick. He be walkin.' I hypothesized a series of reductions starting with 'does be,' then losing 'be,' then reinterpreting 'be.' What's crucial, though, is I started to look at rules that allow 'does' to be lost. You want to get from 'does be' to rules for the reduction of 'does.' All over Creole you find a rule that can delete 'be.' 'I'm a do it.' This is far more correct than people realize who think this is lazy slang."

One of the first attempts to link "Creole" scholarship with the teaching of African American children came in

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a special June 1979 issue of the *Journal of Black Studies*. The issue was devoted to "Ebonics (Black English): Implications For Education." The editor of the journal then and now is Temple University professor Molefi Kete Asante, one of America's leading, and most controversial, Afrocentrists. In one article, "Ebonics: A Legitimate System of Oral Communication," Jean Wofford complained that "black children continue to be subjected to teachers who label the Ebonics system as bad, substandard, incorrect, impoverished, deprived, and nonlanguage." In fact, the ability of black children to switch back and forth between language "suggests that their total linguistic resources are greater than that of monolingual white children."

That same year, a group of black Michigan parents sued the local school district in *Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School Children* v. *Ann Arbor School District Board* to have the right to have their children educated in Ebonics. In a limited decision, U.S. District Court Judge Charles W. Joiner relied on the testimony of scholars such as Geneva Smitherman and William Labov on the Creole origins of black English to rule in favor of the parents. Joiner ordered Ann Arbor to institute special language programs for black students.

But Ebonics did not really take off until the late 1980s, when black parents saw that new waves of immigrants were receiving federal funds for bilingual language education. "Black parents feel that the schools validate the language of the Cuban, Puerto Rican and Mexican students," Gwendolyn Cooke, director of Urban Services at the National Association of Secondary School Principals, said in the December 23 *Chicago Tribune*. "They wonder: Why can't the schools apply the same teaching methods to the black child?"

California, as so often is the case, became the testing ground. Seeking to address the problem of San Diego black students' chronically poor academic performance, Thomas Payzant turned to Agin Shaheed, an instructor at the Timbuktu Learning Academy at San Diego's Fulton Elementary School, one of Payzant's original pilot schools. Shaheed says that in eight years the program has become institutionalized. "We're right on the cutting edge," Shaheed says, "which has been to introduce to schools the idea that African American students do come with a home culture orientation to a majority culture, European American. The Ebonics is that there is a west African dialect that causes them to speak in a way that makes English almost a second language." The aim of the program is to boost the "self-validation" of students. To this end, Ebonics-trained teachers stress what is called the oral tradition of call-response. The students listen to poems and then give each other "skin" or respond in slang to the teacher. If they agree with the speaker, this is called "cosigning."

The argument of Ebonics advocates is that their unique programs will permit black children to excel at what critics of Ebonics say they want black children to learn: regular English. By reading and conversing in both, Ebonologists say, they will become bilingual in both Ebonics and "standard" English. This assertion has already prompted previous critics of Ebonics such as Jesse Jackson to beat a retreat. Even a cursory look at how Ebonics actually is being taught, however, suggests that this rationale cannot be sustained. As Ebonics programs are administered, they seem to be little more than a means to allow black youngsters to pass through the school system without ever mastering the basics of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Consider San Diego. "At our school," says Agin Shaheed, "if a writing assignment is handed in, written in the home language, the teacher will say, 'I like this. This is good. How would it look otherwise?' They will not say, 'This is incorrect.' "

And Shaheen's views do not seem particularly unusual in the California system. In Los Angeles, where LeMoine is running the Ebonics program, teachers apparently employ Ebonics not merely as a bridge to English, but teach it as a language in its own right. According to the February 16, 1995, *Los Angeles Times*, in Pomona at the Roosevelt Elementary School, teacher Vicky Rasshan explained to her fifth-graders that as slaves "picked up English, it blended with their African languages, creating Ebonics."

Ebonics-trained teachers rely on books such as *The Hundred Penny Box* (published by Scholastic), which is written in dialect: "The ice cream be melted fore you get home." Then the students discuss whether black English dialect or standard English dialect is superior.

There is no evidence that Ebonics has improved the English of black students. In San Diego, the effects of Ebonics teaching on standardized test scores have, as Shaheed reluctantly put it, been "spotty." Grades are up, he notes. But on what criteria? In Los Angeles, where the school district spends considerable sums on Ebonics, the latest Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills showed, according to the December 23 *Sacramento Bee*, that scores at the Ebonics-infused Normandie Elementary School have, in fact, dropped in reading and language skills.

But Ebonics continues to gain legitimacy. Last week in Washington, the nation's arbiters of language, the members of The Modern Language Association, met for their annual conference. In a December 28 session on the "'I' Construction in African American Discourse" William Cook of Dartmouth made a stirring case for what might be called the classical view: he used the poetry of the freed slave Phyllis Wheatley to show how her love of Roman and Greek literature allowed her to transcend ephemeral concerns about race, and the limitations imposed upon her by slavery, to write poems such as "To Maecenas." But the classicist Cook cut a lonely figure. Far more representative of the panelists was English professor Demetrice A. Worley of Bradley University, who veered between offering poems and anecdotes about herself and reciting Swahili. "My ancestors are forcing me to make new sounds," Worley cried out. New sounds for the votaries of Ebonics as they enslave a new generation in the chains of ignorance. •

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DEMOCRACY'S DISCONTENT

By Erik Wemple

Election Day is usually a non-event for residents of Washington, D.C. The nation's capital, after all, sends no voting representatives to Congress. It chips in with exactly three Electoral College votes in presidential races. And D.C.'s overwhelmingly Democratic electorate settles its city council races in the September primaries. The only suspense comes from watching just how few votes Republican candidates marshal. In one city precinct, for instance, Bob Dole got three.

But District voters had one reason to turn out this past November: school board elections. In the preceding months, the D.C. public school system, which has been failing in many ways for many years, imploded. It failed to open school buildings for the start of fall classes, sent pupils into classrooms without textbooks and botched everything from school lunches to security. In the autumn campaign, reformist candidates convinced voters they could restore the school board to something approaching competency, and they won.

The next morning, District voters awoke to find that they should have forgone their trek to the polls in favor of something more meaningful, like tuning in to TV coverage of contests in jurisdictions governed by democracy. The city's financial control board, a five-member panel created by Congress in April, 1995, to oversee the D.C. government, had leaked word it would soon depose the school board and effectively take control of the school system.

The control board's decision had significance for more than just the public schools. It signaled the end of the one great idea that has animated local politics in the nation's capital for forty years: the people who live here should govern themselves, as other Americans do. For generations, Washingtonians measured political progress by how close they were to this goal. In 1973 they came as close as they've ever come, winning the right to elect local leaders for the first time in a century. But the march of progress soon stalled, a victim of the District's dysfunctional relationship with Congress and of its dysfunctional political class, and was replaced by regression. That regression—toward a city governed again from outside—had entered its final stage by the day the control board said it was taking over the schools. The federal overseers were back, to begin scrapping D.C.'s experiment in self-government. As astounded school board member Jay Silberman asked *The Washington Post*, "Are they throwing out democracy on the day of an election?"

Yes. And the people who live in Washington, the recipients of the blessings of democracy, offered little objection. Even the cries of outrage from the city's home rule warriors were carefully calibrated. No one said the people of the District would not tolerate the annulment of their democratic rights because everyone knew they most certainly would. The people of Washington were quite prepared to sit by and watch a federal board haul away their voting rights. Years of living under a large and expensive bureaucracy that delivered less bang for the buck than any other city in the country had left home rule with few allies. District residents wanted their streets safe, their garbage picked up and their kids educated—and they weren't too concerned about who made it happen. Washingtonians seemed to have reached a tipping point that is rare, radical and always momentous in politics: they became willing to give up on the ideal of independence for the promise of order and security.

After the control board's decision, President Clinton, who made a media tour of an inner-city neighborhood when he first moved to town, and who then promised to do great things for Washington, and who then did nothing at all, summed up the District's problems this way: "Washington, D.C., is really not quite a state, but not quite a city. It is not quite dependent and not quite independent. And I think that is the source of a lot of the difficulties we face today."

That's right. The District's difficulties are rooted in the U.S. Constitution, which gives Congress the power to govern the city as it sees fit. Since the city's founding in 1800, however, Congress hasn't seen fit to grant locals the democratic rights enjoyed by citizens elsewhere. There were, over the city's first 100 years, sporadic experiments in democracy. The first Washingtonians elected their own mayor, school board and city council. And, during most of the Reconstruction period, Washington actually enjoyed self-government as something on the order of a state. But, in a development Washingtonians of today might consider prescient, Governor Alexander Sheppard

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spent the District into bankruptcy, and, in 1874, Congress dissolved all elected bodies and instructed the president to appoint commissioners to govern the city like a junta. Congress kept control for nearly a century. As the city became more and more black—in large part because of President Truman's 1948 executive order barring discrimination against blacks in the federal government—it came more and more to resemble what home rule activists would come to call it, the last plantation: a fiefdom ruled by Dixiecrat congressmen who operated in autocratic splendor from their leather chairs in the House District Committee, which determined how much money the city would get and how it would be spent. The duke of the Dixiecrats was Representative John McMillan, a South Carolina Democrat who banged the District committee's gavel for twenty-two years. Five times between 1955 and 1965, McMillan killed bills to grant voting rights to District residents. "No one seems to object to the work performed by this committee except the public," he said.

The racial injustice of all this—a black population ruled by white Southerners who regarded the black locals as unfit for self-government—was lost on no one, and it became an open issue during the early 1960s. After the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) completed their drive for voting rights in the rest of the country, they brought their campaign to the last place in the country that had no voting rights: its capital.

The local freedom movement soon thrived. In 1964, Congress granted D.C. residents the right to vote for president. But nearly two centuries of autocratic rule by Congress didn't end easily. In 1965, the McMillan-led Dixiecrats joined forces with Washington's white business leaders to defeat the strongest bid for home rule to date, a bill drafted by the D.C. Democratic Party and supported by the Johnson White House.

The defeat of the 1965 bill prompted SNCC activist Marion Barry to hatch the Free D.C. movement, which boycotted District businesses that declined to place the movement's stickers in their windows and make cash contributions to the cause. Free D.C. didn't survive for long, but it galvanized a group of motivated civil rights activists and eventual D.C. politicos, including Eleanor Holmes Norton, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Julius Hobson, Walter Fauntroy and Frank Smith. Slowly, the movement chipped away at disenfranchisement: the District gained an appointed mayor and city council in 1967, a popularly elected school board in 1968 and a nonvoting congressional delegate in 1971.

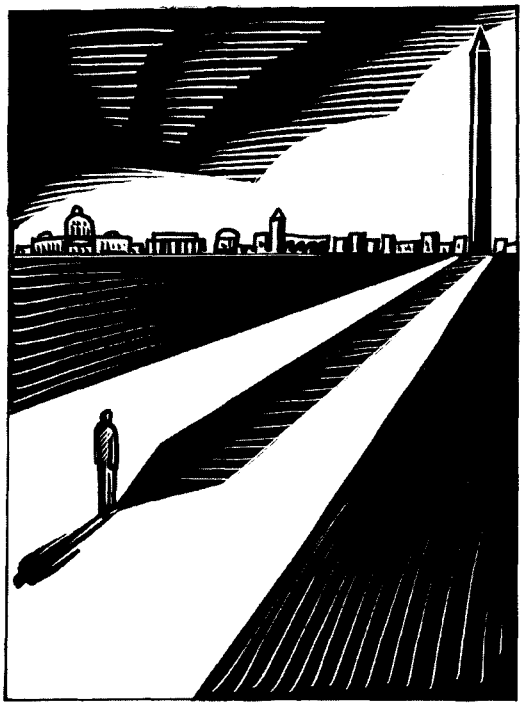

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY RUSSO FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Then came the game breaker. In 1972, the activists converged in South Carolina to campaign against McMillan in his Democratic primary. McMillan lost. Charles Diggs, an African American Democrat sympathetic to home rule, took his place on the District committee. On Christmas Eve, 1973, President Nixon signed the home rule charter that finally gave residents of the nation's capital the right to elect their own mayor, city council and neighborhood representatives.

Today, District officials constantly harrumph about the charter's fatal drawbacks: it denies voting representation for D.C. residents in Congress, gives Congress full authority over city spending, leaves prosecution of crimes in federal hands and bars the city government from taxing commuters. But at the time of passage, local politicians were giddy over the prospect of stumping for votes in D.C. neighborhoods and showing Congress they could manage their own affairs. Despite its deficiencies, the charter was viewed as a victory for black self-determination, the culmination of a bitter fight to free one of the last strongholds of Jim Crowism. Recalls D.C. historian Keith Melder, "Although it was at some level an illusion, it made people feel as though they had been freed."

Twenty-three years after the dawn of home rule, on a mild Wednesday evening in mid-December, the advisory neighborhood commission (ANC) for Columbia Heights, a racially diverse neighborhood in the city's Northwest quadrant, gathers for its monthly meeting in a raggedy building on a crime-ridden strip of 14th Street. Under the home rule charter, ANC meetings are where the city's residents bond with their local government. When the charter was under negotiation in Congress, *The Washington Post* editorialized that the commissions "would bridge the gap between citizens and public institutions."

Tonight's Columbia Heights ANC meeting, however, is bridging apathy and inaction. Five of the neighborhood's ten commissioners sit around two long folding tables placed end to end in a conference room decorated by sketches of civil rights leaders and cork bulletin boards. Chairman Lenwood Johnson deadpans that one of the absent commissioners "got caught up with Christmas shopping," another is busy with his kids, and another "hasn't shown up in two years," according to another commissioner. The commission is one member short of the quorum required to conduct official business.

Not that their constituents seem to care: the commission's community sign-in sheet lists one entry: me. As the commissioners munch pretzels, Johnson discusses the

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agenda's only action item: how to get the city to pay the commission its quarterly budget. The problem, Johnson says, is that the commission and the city auditor disagree over what constitutes a legitimate commission expense. "For example," Johnson says, "the regulations authorize us to spend the funds for 'nominal refreshments.' Now, what is nominal to one person is not nominal to another."

Johnson then gets an absent commissioner on the phone and coaxes him to rush over to the meeting for a bookkeeping resolution required to get funds from the city. The commissioner arrives; they vote; they adjourn.

Conventional wisdom on how home rule went from liberal ideal to what goes on at the Columbia Heights ANC blames the man who has controlled the city for all but nine of home rule's twenty-three years: Marion Barry. This is about one-third right. It was Barry who squandered city funds to build his political base, dishing out generous contracts to cronies whose only qualifications for public service were their campaign contributions. And it was Barry who tackled every city problem with a do-nothing task force and more municipal employees. And it was Barry who partied in the mayoral limousine while the city crumbled around him. Most home rule post mortems also finger the D.C. council for approving foolhardy budgets and thwarting legislation aimed at modernizing the city bureaucracy.

But Barry and the council had powerful accomplices: Congress and the president's Office of Management and Budget (OMB), both of which are vested with the power to return bad budgets to the city council's inbox. Neither, however, ever bothered to do the math. "I remember sending the city budgets to OMB," recalls Nelson Rimensnyder, a career staffer on the House Subcommittee on the District of Columbia. "We'd send it on a Thursday, and it would come back the next day."

And it wasn't just that Congress was indifferent. When it did meddle in the District's affairs—such as when Senator Richard Shelby, outraged over the shooting death of office staffer Tom Barnes on Capitol Hill, forced District residents to vote on a referendum on the death penalty—its heavy-handedness simply further alienated residents.

In 1991, Congress got excited about Sharon Pratt Dixon, who replaced Barry as Mayor. Dixon promised to extirpate the waste from District government "not with a broom, but a shovel." But she needed help: the development boom had gone bust, and Kelly (Dixon married James R. Kelly III while in office) was having trouble paying expenses with the city's trickling revenue streams. Lawmakers on the Hill loved Kelly—one described her as a "breath of fresh air"—and dipped $200 million deep into federal coffers to assist her in cleaning up the mess.

Much of the cash went into Kelly's twenty-five-member security detail, her new downtown cherry-wood offices and the bulletproof windows in her eleventh floor suite. What happened to the rest is something of a mystery. What is known is that she passed along a $722 million deficit to Barry, when he won a fourth term.

In February 1995, Barry went public with the disaster of the city's finances and pleaded for federal help in managing the city's bulging portfolio of municipal functions—all the work of a city government plus state responsibilities such as prisons, Medicare, Medicaid and others. This was the first real moment of surrender, the first time one of the city's governing class asked to be stripped of some of the power to govern. Wall Street junked the District's credit rating and Congress went to work on legislation to create the control board.

The control board's powers are vast. It can force the dismissal of any D.C. government appointee. It can veto any substantial contract issued by the D.C. government—stripping Barry of his ability to dispense political gratitude. And if the board decides it doesn't like a budget approved by the council and the mayor, it can order them to fashion an alternative more to its liking. Says D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, "If you fight the control board, you lose."

It's a Thursday night in early February, and the thirty-odd members of the D.C. Democratic State Committee (DSC) are listening to a speech by Lawrence Guyot, a civil rights veteran and home rule champion. "There were only thirty people in the Congress when the 'slave bill' was passed," says Guyot, referring to the control board legislation. "This body of five people have [sic] the right to do away with rent control and they need only two things—a public announcement and three of the five votes," he says. "These five people have absolute power over all services provided to the city." Guyot thunders on, asking for a resolution advocating the board's abolition and finishing with an emotional appeal on voting rights: "In 1645, one vote gave Oliver Cromwell control of England ... in 1875, it was one vote that changed France from a monarchy to a republic ... in 1923, Adolf Hitler obtained leadership of the Nazi Party by, guess what? One vote!"

And in April the DSC did pass Guyot's anti-control board resolution, but with little enthusiasm. It later dropped it, opting instead for a moot resolution on D.C. statehood. "At this point, most people don't even care about democratic principles," says Jamin Raskin, an associate dean at American University. "They want the schools to be repaired and the buses to run on time and to have basic services restored."

Their long odds notwithstanding, Guyot and other anti-control board activists gathered on Saturday, December 14, at the 25th Statehood Party Convention to discuss strategy. No one could argue with the message belted out by convention speakers: District residents have been colonial subjects for nearly two centuries and deserve to participate fully in American democracy.

But no one showed up to argue, and few showed up to agree. The convention netted about one activist for each of the Statehood Party's twenty-five years of activism. After denouncing the control board, Guyot prowled the front of the convention room, asking the audience questions about the control board's power. "Who can tell me what the securitization bill is?" asked Guyot. The crowd sat silent; no one had a clue. "See!" cried Guyot. "You don't know enough to fight the enemy." •

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THE HARD QUESTIONS

Looks that kill

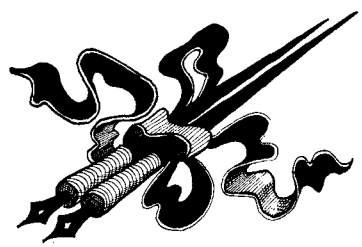
Consider a few signs of the times. In a report last winter in *USA Today*, the sheer horror of female aging was exposed under the sub-heading, "Some women on fast track feel derailed." The report detailed the ways in which middle-aged women facing "common signs of the approach of menopause" find it wreaks havoc on their careers. They feel "fragile, fearful and angry." I don't want to diminish the nuisance of hot flashes. But get a grip. The menopause horror story suggests that a woman's potential enemies list now includes her own body. She must get it under control. So women are to "strategize menopause." These strategies include medication, therapy, support groups and "coming out" as menopausal in the corporate board room.

And medical science has provided us other weapons in the "battle against aging." Pick up any city magazine or newspaper these days and you are struck by the proliferation of ads for cosmetic surgery. If you want to keep such operations a secret from your friends you can head off to a posh spa, go under the knife, spend a couple of weeks recovering from the worst bruises and swelling, and go home looking tanned and brand new. That, at least, is the promise.

It is human to be preoccupied with our bodies. But there is something bizarre when our bodies are seen as enemies to be conquered. Here a cultural project—the flight from bodily limits—shakes hands with a triumphalist technological agenda. The promise is that someday we'll have fewer things to fight and to fix because we'll be practically perfect at birth. We'll stay "forever young" as a recent *Time* cover extolled over a photo of a nubile, svelte young woman emerging from a swimming pool. But while this quest to triumph over our natures and to accept only undamaged bodies is sold as technological optimism and cultural progress, it is better understood as a mark of social despair. For it will lead to a narrowing of our acceptance of human life in all its variety; a radical constriction of who we admit into the moral community.

Consider the Human Genome Project, an effort to map the genetic code of the human race. The premise and promise is that we might one day intervene decisively to guarantee better, if not flawless, human products. They're already talking about Designer Genes (that is genes, not jeans). Do you want a blue-eyed, blond-haired strapping youth with athletic tendencies, perfect teeth and a seventy-five-year warranty? We may soon see advertisements of just this sort.

And there is, of course, a flip side. It is already routine to screen out and eliminate fetuses on the grounds that early detection and selective elimination of the "imperfect" unborn is a compelling social good. And why not? Flawed human beings are less productive. They will surely suffer, and that is bad; they will be more than an ordinary burden to families and communities. How much longer before aging itself is considered anomalous when set against blooming youth? The unproductive elderly may be encouraged, for we are kind people, to permit themselves to be euthanized because they are extra mouths to feed and a nuisance to others. But who makes these determinations?



Not surprisingly, the assisted-suicide movement is lopsidedly opposed by those who are likely targets of pressure to get out of the way—the frail, the elderly and the terminally ill. But the technocratic view against which they struggle has taken powerful hold. In a recent review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of four new books on the genetic revolution, the reviewer opined matter-of-factly that "we must inevitably start to choose our descendants." He adds that we do this now in "permitting or preventing the birth of our own children according to their medical prognosis, thus selecting the lives to come." So long as society doesn't cramp our freedom of action, we will exercise sovereign choice by consigning to death those with a less than stellar potential for a life not "marred by an excess of pain or disability."

I'm not advocating nature in the raw. Interventions to repair troubles *in utero* are increasingly commonplace and many problems are fixable—they do not amount to a repudiation of difference but a humane way to correct medical anomalies. But a Down Syndrome child, by contrast, is not anomalous: he or she just is that way. You can't perform surgery to fix "it." You can only intervene to eliminate, which means you are excising a whole category of persons. Yet such interventions are now morally respectable. The only sad part, in the eyes of many, is that we don't yet know how to genetically script matters so that no such fetuses show up. So we are forced to resort to the clumsy business of "therapeutic" abortion. But one fine day....

If you haven't already, read P. D. James's novel *The Children of Men*. The novel is set in Britain in the year 2021. No children have been born on planet Earth since 1995. In that year, for reasons no one understands, all males became infertile. The world is dying. People are despondent, chagrined, violent. "Western science has been our god," writes the protagonist, Theodore Faron, an Oxford historian and cousin to the dictator of Great Britain. He "shares the disillusionment" of one whose god has died. Now overtaken by a "universal negativism," the human race lurches toward its certain demise. Because there will be no future, "all pleasures of the mind and senses sometimes seem ... no more than pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruins." Children's playgrounds are dismantled. People disown commitments and responsibilities for one another save for whatever serves some immediate purpose.

People thought they had eliminated evil, Faron notes, and in the 1990s churches "moved from the theology of sin and redemption" to a "sentimental humanism." In the name of compassion, the elderly, no longer needed or wanted, are conducted to a state-sponsored ceremony of group suicide called the Quietus. Faron concludes that we are "diminished," we humans, if we live without knowledge of the past and without hope of the future—all projects tied to finitude and to human struggle framed by an acceptance of limits. For in a world in which birth has ceased and death is managed or staged, the very words "justice," "compassion," "society," "struggle," "evil," become "unheard echoes on an empty air." To be sure, we can "experience nothing but the present moment," but our understanding of that moment is given meaning by our ability to "reach back through the centuries for the reassurance of our ancestry." This rich ancestry loses its meaning, in turn, "without the hope of posterity ... without the assurance that we being dead yet live." For whom do we build? On whose behalf do we dream? If we—as individuals and as a society—focus ever more on our own quest for self-possession, perfection and control, we will not be able to ask such questions, much less answer them.

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

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BOOKS & The Arts

Stanley Kauffmann on Films

The Merchant of Venus

"If the First Amendment will protect a scumbag like me, then it will protect all of you. Because I'm the worst." Under this blazon **The People vs. Larry Flynt** (Columbia) advances. Flynt is the publisher of *Hustler* whose career in the porno-mag business and whose tangles because of it are the subject of Milos Forman's film. It's refreshing in these days of Moral Majorities, of religion as power tool, to see a film that defies those forces. That point is past argument. Now, if you like, let's believe that people will flock to this picture not because of its nudity and sex, but because we're all First Amendment absolutists.

Flynt was born in rural Kentucky and, we see, began in business as a boy, peddling moonshine with his brother. Next, in the early 1970s, in Ohio, he is running strip clubs with his brother while liberally sampling the stock in trade. He starts a newsletter to draw customers. The letter becomes *Hustler*, and Flynt becomes very rich. He meets, loves and eventually marries Althea Leasure, a bisexual underage stripper. They are devoted to each other, in their errant way, until she dies of AIDS and drugs.

Obscenity charges against Flynt come early and keep coming. With good legal counsel and with personal flamboyance, he wriggles through his troubles. (The real Flynt appears briefly as one of the judges trying the film's Flynt.) But troubles magnify when *Hustler* publishes raunchy jokes and cartoons about one of Flynt's most vociferous enemies, Jerry Falwell. Falwell sues; Flynt loses. Flynt appeals, and, after the usual judicial ascent, his appeal is heard by the Supreme Court, which in 1988 reverses the judgment, on First Amendment grounds.

Meanwhile, a personal horror has struck. A would-be assassin has shot Flynt and his lawyer, Alan Isaacman. Isaacman recovers completely, but Flynt is left paralyzed from the waist down. He is in agony and starts to hit drugs. (In sympathy Althea joins him.) Neurosurgery eliminates both his pain and any chance of recovery; he quits drugs. (Althea doesn't.) Flynt's assailant is still unknown, the film says. This fact, however, doesn't prevent the screenwriters, Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, from showing him—indeed, showing how he trailed Flynt from courtroom to courtroom. (Why are they so sure it was a man? Mightn't a woman have wanted to murder Flynt for his treatment of her or for his general exploitation of women?)

The film isn't quite as daring as the man it's about. First, in the matter of nudity. Flynt keeps talking about vaginas. In one photo session he parts the legs of a reclining nude model. *Hustler* will corroborate this candor, but the film is more conservative: no vaginas. Second, the problematic material about Falwell that appeared in *Hustler*, including a cartoon of him having sex with his mother in an outhouse, does not appear in the film. If the film's reticence is because of the rating systems of the Motion Picture Association of America, this is a sour comment on the relative freedoms of the American press and screen—under the same First Amendment.

The film is further softened by some sentimental devices. When Althea dies—in her ornate bath, drugged out and drowned—Thomas Newman's music swells glutinously, with a wordless chorus behind it. (That chorus, soaring wordlessly over emotional peaks, must be the best-employed group in Movieland.) When Flynt returns home after his wife's funeral, he sees, in his mind's eye, flashbacks of their earlier days together, and we hear her voice on the soundtrack. *True Romance* invades *Hustler*.

Further, a trouble that couldn't be altered but that affects the climax. As Flynt himself implies in his scumbag aphorism, he is not the hero of his principal struggle. He is a victim, endangered, like the girl tied to the railroad track. The Supreme Court *en bloc* is the hero that rides to the rescue. It would be a mite difficult to create a climax out of nine justices doing research and conferring, but at the end of the film Flynt, dramatically speaking, is just someone waiting for help.

Forman, a Czech native who came to this country in 1969, has mostly clung to American subjects here: *Taking Off, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Hair, Ragtime.* Of these, only *Cuckoo's Nest* was really interesting, and that was mostly because of Jack Nicholson. Forman then dealt with two European subjects, *Valmont* and *Amadeus*, and in the second of these he at least improved that dubious play. But he has not become a director on whom one can rely for stylistic flavor. *Larry Flynt* included, one can't speak of a Forman film, only of a film by Forman.

Still, he has done well here with his actors. Courtney Love plays Althea with

FILMS WORTH SEEING

The Crucible. *Arthur Miller's best play, about the Salem witch trials, seems even better now that it's free of modern allusion. Good, and gets better as it goes. (Reviewed 12/16/96)* **The English Patient.** *The screenplay, about several World War II romances, becomes pulpy, but the acting and the cinematography never falter. (12/9/96)* **The Portrait of a Lady.** *Jane Campion directs her own feminist-oriented version of Henry James. If you can accept the approach, she affords some rewards of her own (12/23/96).* **Shine.** *From Australia, a fictionalized true story about a young pianist pushed into neurosis by a too-sternly loving father—and the after effects. Exceptionally well performed. (11/18/96)*—**SK**

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sexual amplitude and moral abandon. Edward Norton, who impressed as the psychopath in *Primal Fear* and as Mr. Young Love in *Everyone Says I Love You*, gives Flynt's lawyer quiet strength. Donna Hanover, who is the wife of New York's mayor, is appealing as Ruth Carter Stapleton, the sister of Jimmy Carter. Stapleton is an evangelist who becomes friends with the Flynts before he is shot and who apparently develops a crush on him. At least Althea becomes jealous. James Cromwell strikes the right note as Charles Keating, the supporter of Falwell who later went to prison for involvement in a savings and loan scandal—and has just been released on legal technicalities.

Woody Harrelson plays Flynt viscerally and cleverly. In the shamefully underrated *Natural Born Killers*, Harrelson seethed and flamed as a young man who soars from the real into the surreal. Here, in a (relatively) more restrained role, he is a man who lives, in person and profession, by exaggerating the real.

Flynt, a postscript tells us, now publishes twenty-nine magazines.

How thoughtful of the people who made **One Fine Day** (20th Century Fox). They've given us a trip back to the 1930s without our having to leave the 1990s. Nothing more clearly marked the '30s film decade than the romantic farce-comedy, such as *Libeled Lady* and *The Awful Truth*, and this new Michelle Pfeiffer-George Clooney picture might, *mutatis mutandis* (as studio execs constantly say), have been made back then.

What are the three prime requirements of the genre? (1) Predictability. We want to know how the picture is going to end very shortly after it begins. (2) We want to enjoy making the trip from beginning to end; so we have to like, really like, the leading actors. (3) Symmetry. Perfect junctures. Not jigsaw-puzzle pieces but building blocks. And *One Fine Day* fills the entire bill.

It all takes place on one not-always-fine day. The screenplay, by Terrel Seltzer and Ellen Simon, begins by showing us that Pfeiffer, divorced and with a 5-year-old son, lives in the same Manhattan apartment house as Clooney, divorced and with a 5-year-old daughter. Talk about symmetry. Pfeiffer and Clooney don't know each other at the start, but they meet cute, as the genre demands, and because of several mix-ups are left with the kids on their hands for the whole day.

This is hard on both adults. She is an architect with a major presentation that day. Clooney is—I can hardly believe this as I type it—a newspaper columnist, a madcap, whose editor tough-loves him. How the two adults meet their profes-

Fevered Lives

TUBERCULOSIS IN AMERICAN CULTURE SINCE 1870

KATHERINE OTT

Photo: Nancy R. Levine

KATHERINE OTT is a historian in the Smithsonian's Division of Science, Medicine, and Society

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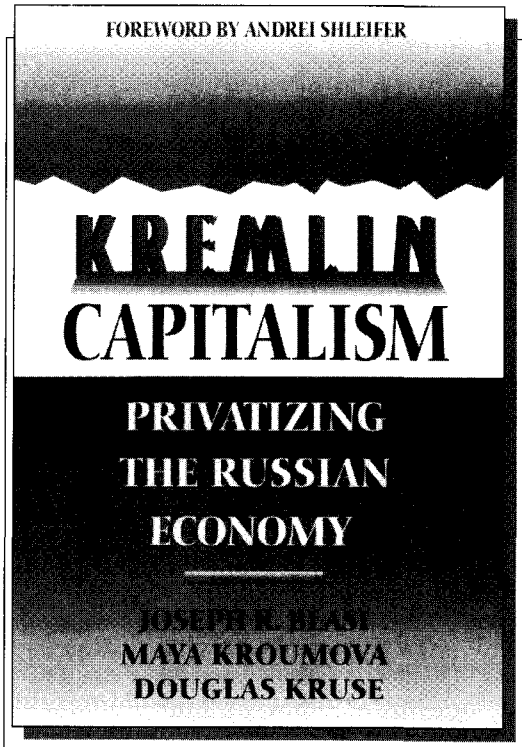

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sional obligations while taking care of their children, who are endearingly exhausting, and how the two adults also develop their own relationship, that's the story. Would you believe that at the beginning they don't like each other—and gradually change their minds?

The picture makes us smile even as we relish its familiar smile-making techniques. The dialogue has some fizz, Clooney combines big-bearishness with some agility, and Pfeiffer has become a star. She has had star billing for some time, but now she *is* a star. She plays with the confidence that comes from knowing that millions are following her whole career, not just what happens in this one picture. She's not an actress of stunning talent, but she has developed winning skills.

The director, Michael Hoffman, keeps the soufflé nice and fluffy. The tempo never sags. Imagine a domestic romp with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn or Cary Grant and Irene Dunne. *Mutatis*, of course, *mutandis*. •

The Universalist

BY ANDREW DELBANCO

Recollected Works of Abraham Lincoln compiled and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher

(Stanford University Press, 648 pp., $60)

When the Republican Party nominated him in May 1860 to run for president, Abraham Lincoln started to see double:

> A very singular occurrence took place the day I was nominated at Chicago four years ago, of which I am reminded tonight. In the afternoon of the day, returning home from downtown, I went upstairs to Mrs. Lincoln's sitting room. Feeling somewhat tired, I lay down upon a couch in the room, directly opposite a bureau upon which was a looking-glass. As I reclined, my eye fell upon the glass, and I saw distinctly *two* images of myself, exactly alike, except that one was a little paler than the other. I arose and lay down again, with the same result. It made me quite uncomfortable for a few moments, but some friends coming in, the matter passed out of my mind.

As the United States was splitting into two, Lincoln felt something similar happening to him, or so it would seem, if we can trust these eerie words, reported in 1865 by the painter Francis Carpenter. Lincoln may even have had a presentiment that a spectral twin would accompany him through life and beyond. Already before the start of his presidency, he was participating in the construction of his own image with carefully posed photographs, with the few personal words he wrote or spoke in public, even with his choice of confidantes. After his death, the process of mythologization continued: he was swiftly memorialized as a giant of ages past, and each successive age has reconceived him in relation to its own preoccupations.

The ceaseless work of reckoning anew with Lincoln depends in part on what David Donald, his most recent biographer, calls "conversations recorded by reliable witnesses." For this reason, everyone interested in Lincoln has to decide sooner or later whom to trust. Was Billy Herndon—Lincoln's law partner, who blamed Mary Todd for his friend's fatigue and distraction—a "reliable witness"? What about Frederick Douglass, who reported that in their last interview Lincoln remarked, "I hate slavery as much as you do"? Now the eminent scholar Don E. Fehrenbacher, in collaboration with his wife Virginia, has collected the raw material of Lincoln lore and sorted it by degrees of credibility. In this fascinating book we have the source (Andrew Curtin, the governor of Pennsylvania) of the legend that Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on an envelope just before delivering it, and of the tradition (invented by Lincoln's Illinois friend, Isaac Cogdal, and publicized by Herndon) that the death of his beloved Anne Rutledge left him near despair, unable to bear the thought of rain falling on her grave.

Each attributed remark is graded by the Fehrenbachers on a scale of A (for entries most likely to be authentic) through E (for those that ought to be removed from the Lincoln gospel and treated as apocrypha). It seems rude to be less than grateful for the Fehrenbachers' painstaking labor, but I find myself sorry to learn that Lincoln might not have said about a vain politician that if he "had known how big a funeral he would have had, he would have died years ago." This remark gets a C; I'd give it an A+. I'd like to believe (as reported by the owner of the Springfield drugstore where Lincoln was a customer in the 1850s) that, when asked what was the matter with Willie and Tad as they screamed in tandem, Lincoln replied, "Just what's the matter with the whole world. I've got three walnuts and each of them wants two." And alas, it turns out that he also might not have said, in countenancing interracial marriage, that "if a white man wants to marry a Negro woman, let him do it—if the Negro woman can stand it."

This book is not reassuring about the possibility of writing "true" history. But does it really matter? In fact, as the Fehrenbachers acknowledge, "the legendary Lincoln, created in part out of dubious recollective material, may have been, in the long run, as powerful an influence in American life as the historical Lincoln." They have given us a glimpse not so much of the historical Lincoln as of the Lincoln created by the collective American imagination. If he did not exist, it would have been necessary to invent him.

In fact, it *was* necessary to invent him. Why is Lincoln the only American president regarded over many generations with something approaching religious devotion? There is a clue, I think, in a phrase that one shrewd contemporary used to describe him: he was, said Nathaniel Hawthorne, "the pattern American." A mirror in which ordinary people saw themselves in all their defects and dignity, Lincoln always felt under hostile inspection by what his private secretary, John Hay, called the "patent-leather, kid-glove set." During the speech at Cooper Union that established him as a national candidate, he worried "before he became warmed up" (according to Herndon) that his suit showed "the creases made while packed in the valise." In the words of an Illinois friend, "he never felt his own utter unworthiness so much as when in the presence of a hotel clerk or waiter."

But Lincoln did not primp or posture in response to these anxieties; he was an iconoclast who never spared himself from his own leveling wit. According to one witness, he spoke of making his first trip to Massachusetts "with hayseed in my hair ... to take a few lessons in deportment." This is the Lincoln of Herndon and Sandburg, whose un-Eastern folksiness was picked up by Will Rogers and Harry Truman, eventually to become a commodity sold to the public by Garri-

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son Keillor and the like. Diagnosed with a mild form of smallpox, this Lincoln tells his physician, "There is one consolation about the matter, doctor, it cannot in the least disfigure me." It would be difficult to find comparable remarks among the attributed sayings (not to mention the documented speeches and writings) of the bewigged and solemn presidents who preceded him.

It was Lincoln who invented self-denigration as a political style. But how does this homely jokester of legend fit with the substantive Lincoln of record? For one thing, both have a taste for broad humor. "If it were not for these stories, jokes, jests," says Lincoln, according to Herndon, "I should die. They give vent—are the vents—of my moods and gloom." The historical Lincoln, explaining his retreat from an early courtship (in a letter whose authenticity seems secure), wrote that he realized his mistake when, looking upon the woman who once had pleased him, he found himself thinking instead of his "mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat, to permit its contracting into wrinkles, but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head, that *nothing* could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirty-five or forty years." In our anti-normative age, jokes about body shape tend to be denounced as cruel, but for Lincoln the point was to acknowledge that most human beings are inelegant specimens (Herndon lovingly described his tall friend as so long-legged that when he sat, "a marble placed on his knee ... would roll hipward, down an inclined plane"), and thereby to explode the pretension of being enchanted by oneself.

The prairie boy of legend and the Lincoln of record share more than wicked wit. They hate pomposity, and they are unfailingly alert to the stirrings of pride. The real Lincoln accrued enormous power while never presuming that the possession of power confers any special merit on its possessor. He referred bitterly to those occasions when he had to sign the execution orders of courts martial as "butcher-days," and though surrounded by flatterers and the trappings of high office, he never doubted that he was driven by forces larger than his own will. In a letter in 1864 to the Kentucky journalist Albert Hodges, he refused any "compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." The Fehrenbachers' book is filled with echoes of this well-known remark, as when the ex-slave Sojourner Truth praised him for being the only president who had done anything for her people—to which Lincoln is said to have replied, "And the only one who had such opportunity. Had our friends in the south behaved themselves, I could have done nothing whatever."

A single, unbroken theme emerges from this book of spurious stories, and it is perfectly continuous with the Lincoln who exists independently of it. This theme is his lifelong contempt for the idea that accidents of worldly rank imply a hierarchy of intrinsic worth. Variously expressed through humor, anger, piety and self-doubt, this principle is what both the actual and the legendary man were essentially about. From the actual Lincoln, one hears it at its purest in the short speech that he delivered in February, 1861, at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where he had stopped en route to his inauguration. Amid rumors of an assassination plot (a few hours later he would switch to a secret train at Baltimore, which then took him to Washington by night), he remarked that "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." Then he elaborated:

> I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence. I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army, who achieved that Independence. [Applause.] I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together.
>
> It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the motherland; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. [Great applause.] It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance. [Cheers.] This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.
>
> Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help to save it. If it can't be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But, if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle—I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it.

Today it may seem callow to take very seriously this pledge of allegiance to equal opportunity as a universal principle. In 1861, however, neither Lincoln's audience in Philadelphia nor the secessionists (who, in response to his election, had already moved to break up the Union) doubted that he meant exactly what he said. When he declared that the "weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men in due time," it was widely understood that "weights" meant slavery, and that "due time" meant that slavery was doomed to die soon. As for the phrase "all men," it meant just that. All men. Black as well as white.

About a year earlier in New Haven, speaking not far from the site of a shoeworkers' strike, he had put the matter even more explicitly:

> I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers *can* strike when they want to, where they are not obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down and obliged to labor whether you pay them or not! I *like* the system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere. One of the reasons why I am opposed to Slavery is just here.... I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he *can* better his condition—when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him!

Now that the "American dream" is more and more becoming a cruel deception, this statement may sound no different from a hack politician peddling the entrepreneurial myth. But when Lincoln said that black men should have the right to become employers, it was hardly something a politician could say casually, especially since he did not rule out the possibility that their employees might be white. And this at a time when no sitting president had ever gone on record to express personal opposition to slavery.

What was the source of Lincoln's antipathy to the "peculiar institution," and how deep did it run? Was he really offended, as he once claimed, by the sight of slaves on a canalboat, "strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot line"? The Fehrenbachers' book is not much help with these perennial questions, precisely because it is authoritative about the dubious authority of its contents. Take, for instance, the problem of motive raised by the famous letter of 1862 to Horace Greeley, in which Lincoln insisted that "my paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Doubt-

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less authentic (they were written in Lincoln's hand), these words come from the same man who a few years earlier had said that "I can not but hate" the "*declared* indifference" of Senator Douglas on the question of whether slavery should live or die.

Since these two public statements seem to need mediation, it is natural, as one reads along, to hope that the Fehrenbachers' impromptu Lincoln will arbitrate between them. One comes expectantly upon a comment from a reporter for the New York *Tribune*, Greeley's paper, that Lincoln had spelled out to a Chicago congressman exactly what he had meant: "The meaning of his letter to Mr. Greeley was this: that he was ready to declare emancipation when he was convinced that it could be made effective and that the people were with him." But the chain of transmission of this remark begins with the congressman, who tells it to the newspaperman, who tells it to an abolitionist activist, in whose papers it was ultimately found. Accordingly, the Fehrenbachers dismiss it with a D.

The problem is summed up in Lincoln's own words (as transcribed by the usually reliable John Hay): "It is impossible to determine the question of the motives that govern men or to gain absolute knowledge of their sympathies." Still, impossible as it may be, knowing how hot or cool were Lincoln's feelings about the suffering of the slaves has never been more important to his standing in the American pantheon than it is today. It is a question that cannot be begged. We can discount it as ahistorical; we can object to holding the past accountable to our own standards of enlightenment; we can even quote Lincoln quoting scripture: "Let us not judge that we be not judged." But the fact is that the persistence of our few national symbols depends on our ability to appropriate them for use—and there is reason to wonder whether Lincoln, the most durable of these symbols, is becoming another casualty of our race-obsessed age.

I believe that Lincoln spoke, and acted, out of profound revulsion at the outrage of slavery. But I state this conviction as a belief, since it is no more or less demonstrable than any religious or aesthetic judgment. Here, from Lincoln's speech on the *Dred Scott* decision, is one of the central interpretable passages:

> All the powers of the earth seem rapidly combining against [the Negro]. Mammon is after him; ambition follows, and philosophy follows, and the Theology of the day is fast joining the cry. They have him in his prison house; they have searched his person, and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is.

I cannot read this without hearing the theme of human equality surging behind it. Therefore, I find no contradiction in the sentiment—whether or not the words are quoted accurately—when the Fehrenbachers' Lincoln calls the Fugitive Slave law of 1850 "ungodly" (the source is the abolitionist Alonzo Grover), or when he remarks (according to a New York businessman, James Gilmore) that "the war has educated our people into abolition."

And yet it is also true that the historical Lincoln, in his speech on the *Dred Scott* case, speaks of "a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people, to the idea of an indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races." Is this merely a description of a prevailing public attitude? (It takes a long search to find any mid-nineteenth-century spokesman for social equality between black and white.) Or is it an endorsement? At the end of this line of questions, there is no consensus.

On the more dispassionate question of why Lincoln thought slavery intolerable in a society putatively based on individual rights, there is something closer to a certain answer. He clearly believed that the violation of rights for anyone threatens the rights of everyone. This view was summed up in the extraordinary fragment on slavery that he composed in a meditative moment, probably in 1854:

> If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right enslave B.—why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?—You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is *color*, then; the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.
>
> You do not mean *color* exactly?—You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own.
>
> But, say you, it is a question of *interest*; and, if you can make it your *interest*, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.

Here, in full view, is Lincoln's protomodern conviction that the very idea of race is incoherent. It is, as we would say, socially constructed. A monstrous idea, it is liable to turn on the masters who have invented and relied on it. Its poison infiltrates everywhere and cannot be contained.

The only antidote to this poison is the idea of the individual; and Lincoln returns again and again to the axiom of individual rights. "A man who denies other men equality of rights is hardly worthy of freedom," he says, in another comment recorded by Hay, "but I would give even to him all the rights which I claim for myself"; and the Fehrenbachers' book is peppered with versions of the argument that reclaiming these rights for black people will serve the best interest of whites: "I do believe, that it will result in good to the white race as well as to those who have been made free by this act of emancipation."

There is, in Lincoln, a universalizing impulse (Herndon quotes him extolling "universal education" and "the universal ballot") that cuts across the flimsy barriers by which people try to wall themselves off from those whom they deem unworthy of inclusion in their circle. His mind was always moving away from the incidental differences among people and toward the affinities and linkages between them—sometimes to their credit (Herndon quotes him on democracy: "the intelligence of the mass of our people was the light and life of the republic"), and sometimes to their shame (on human motivation: "at bottom, the snaky tongue of selfishness will wag out"). Lincoln recognized mankind and he recognized persons; but he never recognized tribes or castes. And so he spoke fervently, in a documented speech in 1858, against the notion that the equality principle of the Declaration was somehow restricted to those descended by blood from its original beneficiaries, or to any other distinguishable group:

> We have besides these men—descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all from these men, they are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those

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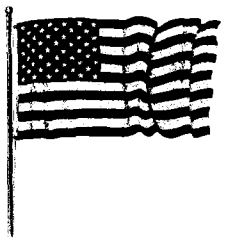

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> days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration [loud and long continued applause], and so they are.

Lincoln did not fail to recognize that this process—which, pejoratively, we call assimilation—entailed damage to the historical community of those "whose ancestors have come hither." Like Tocqueville, he recognized that "in democratic communities the imagination is compressed when men consider themselves"; but also like Tocqueville, he believed that "it expands indefinitely when they think of the state." Devotion to the state, to the Union, was Lincoln's answer to the inescapable American problem of feeling unmoored from one's ancestral past.

Here we have the deepest reason that Lincoln's grip on our imagination may be weakening. In our time, the symbols through which he thought Americans could receive and transmit a sense of common destiny have been terribly vitiated. Consider this apposite comment from John Eaton, the army chaplain who became superintendent of freedmen under President Grant, who reported the president's remark at the height of the war

> that there were some people who thought the work on the Capitol ought to stop on account of the war, people who begrudged the expenditure, and the detention of the workmen from the army.... [But] in his judgment, the finishing of the Capitol would be a symbol to the nation of the preservation of the Union. If [said he] people see the Capitol going on, it is a sign we intend the Union shall go on.

This is the Lincoln about whom Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy, observed that "the Union with him in sentiment rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism." In the age of Gingrich, it takes a truly undiscourageable patriot to see the Capitol as a symbol of sublimity. Since Lincoln is finally the name we give to the concept of individual rights under the protection of federal authority, his future as a national icon seems in doubt—especially now that his promise of upward mobility as a realistic hope for all Americans threatens to become a sham. And since the academic left has responded with little more than a mantra about group identity, it is increasingly difficult to invoke Lincoln as a precedent for serious thinking about the live problems of our day. Income disparity, illegitimacy, affirmative action, abortion: these are problems that defy the old formula of individual rights on which Americans have traditionally found common ground.

Thus Lincoln the champion of self-reliance is in trouble for preaching an illusion. And Lincoln the anti-slavery man is in trouble for equivocating on racial equality. There will be those who use the Fehrenbachers' scrupulous work as a means to explode the whole Lincoln "myth"—built, as this book shows more clearly than has ever been showed before, on hearsay and imperfect memory. But the demythologizers should think again. For, in their core convictions, the mythical figure and the actual man have been indistinguishable since even before his martyrdom, as one discerns in the words of Lincoln's greatest celebrant. During the winter of 1863-64, Walt Whitman spent his days tending Union wounded in hospitals in and around Washington, where the most he could do was offer a hand in comfort or write a letter home for a maimed or illiterate boy. Afterwards, he would "wander about a good deal, sometimes at night under the moon" and on one mild February evening he stopped in front of the White House:

> The white portico—the palace-like, tall, round columns, spotless as snow—the walls also—the tender and soft moonlight, flooding the pale marble, and making peculiar faint languishing shades, not shadows—everywhere a soft transparent hazy, thin, blue moon-lace, hanging in the air—the brilliant and extra-plentiful clusters of gas, on and around the façade, column, portico, &c.—everything so white, so marbly pure and dazzling yet soft—the White House of future poems, and of dreams and dramas, there in the soft and copious moon ...

When I closed the Fehrenbachers' wonderful collation of dreams and (some fanciful) dramas, I found myself doubting that many more future poems will be written.

ANDREW DELBANCO's new book, on classic American literature, will be published next fall by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The Philosopher of Life

BY RICHARD WOLIN

Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz by Hans Jonas edited by Lawrence Vogel

(Northwestern University Press, 218 pp., $22.50)

I.

On April 9, 1964, an intellectual event of international magnitude took place. The occasion was a conference at Drew University on the relevance of Martin Heidegger's thought for contemporary Protestant theology. Heidegger himself had been scheduled to give the inaugural lecture, but he withdrew a few months before the event, for reasons of health. In Heidegger's stead, the organizers of the conference invited Hans Jonas.

The choice of Jonas as a replacement seemed a logical one. For four years in the 1920s, Jonas had studied philosophy under Heidegger at the University of Marburg. Under the guidance of Heidegger and the great Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann, he wrote a brilliant dissertation on the varieties of Gnostic religion in late antiquity. In 1934, the first volume of Jonas's study appeared in Germany. By then, Jonas had fled his native land, since Hitler's Law for the Reconstitution of the German Civil Service had effectively barred Jews from university posts. In 1933, Jonas sought refuge in London. In 1935, he emigrated to Palestine. In 1955, he came to New York, where he was a professor of philosophy at the New School for Social Research.

By 1964, the "Heidegger and theology" vogue had reached its pinnacle. Heidegger's celebration of an ineffable

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and primordial "Being," whose "call" mankind was reverently supposed to heed, was surely an oblique way of talking about God. In his "Letter on Humanism," written in 1947, Heidegger characterized Being in neoscholastic terms as a type of first unmoved mover. Its mysterious "destinings," he claimed, had nothing to do with "man": "Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the lighting of Being.... The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being." In a celebrated interview two decades later in *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger boldly proclaimed that so forlorn and misguided had modern humanity become that "only a god can save us." This seemed to clinch matters: after his apostasy in the 1920s as a proponent of an "existentialist humanism," Heidegger, the lapsed Catholic and the world's greatest living philosopher, had returned to the fold. Theologians everywhere could barely conceal their glee.

And so few were prepared for the unflinching, sober polemic that Jonas delivered that evening. Jonas asserted that theologians had been seduced by the pseudo-religious implications of Heidegger's notion of the "fate-laden" character of thinking. As Jonas explained, the Christian believer was the opposite of "fate-laden." Christian faith meant that the believer would be delivered from the arbitrariness of fate. Redemption, moreover, and the belief that inspired it, were not exactly events of this world, and so they were far from "fated." Christianity had always depended on a spiritual dignity that transcended mundane temporality and the injustices of "fate." And God's biblical injunctions—to Adam, to Cain, to Abraham—were ethical commandments, not summonses to "Being" and a blind ontological obedience.

Jonas did not stop there. In case the audience had any doubts as to where Heidegger's own "obedience to fate" had led during the 1930s, Jonas took it upon himself to refresh their memories:

> Heidegger's Being is an occurrence of unveiling, a fate-laden happening upon thought: so was the Führer and the call of German destiny under him: an unveiling of something indeed, a call of Being all right, fate-laden in every sense: neither then nor now did Heidegger's thought provide a norm by which to decide how to answer such calls.... Heidegger's own answer is, to the shame of philosophy, on record and, I hope, not forgotten: "Let not doctrines and 'ideas' be the rules of your Being. The Führer himself and alone is the present and future German reality and its law. Learn ever deeper to know: that from now on each and everything demands decision, and every action, responsibility. Heil Hitler!"

When Jonas finished speaking, the audience rose from its seats to give him a standing ovation. The Drew University conference had been conceived and staged as a "pro-Heidegger" event, but Jonas's intellectual acuity and plain humanity carried the day. Jonas's astute criticism of the ethical failure of Heidegger's "fundamental ontology"—Being, we might say, was ethically challenged—would have an immense impact on the interpretation of Heidegger and on the philosophical community generally. The Heideggerian faithful proffered their rebuttals, of course; but, by daring to confront Heidegger's Nazism directly and—what was, at the time, even more controversial—by seeking to tie the philosopher's politics directly to the defects of his thought, Jonas displayed the moral integrity that was the hallmark of his life and work.

II.

Hans Jonas was born in 1903 in Mönchengladbach, Germany. He began his philosophical studies at Freiburg in 1921, though for the next three years he was also a student at Berlin's Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, or University for the Science of Judaism. An interest in Jewish theology remained an abiding concern until the end of his life. During the 1920s Jonas was one of a remarkable coterie of Jewish students, including Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith and Herbert Marcuse, who had been lured to Marburg and Freiburg by Heidegger's growing renown. A war later and a world away, the émigrés Löwith, Jonas and Arendt would in succession assume positions in the philosophy department of the New School for Social Research. Jonas's tenure there began in 1955 and ended with his retirement in 1976.

With the exception of Jonas, for whom Judaism had always been a living concern, the rest of that group came from highly assimilated backgrounds. In the late 1920s, like most acculturated Jews, they labored under the delusion that German nationality was a question of language and culture, not a question of race. Sometime around 1933, however, the scales abruptly fell from their eyes. In his superb autobiography, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, Löwith, whose family had long ago converted to Protestantism, provides eloquent testimony concerning the shock that was experienced by assimilated Jewry at the outset of the Nazi years. Speaking of Oskar Becker, another stu-

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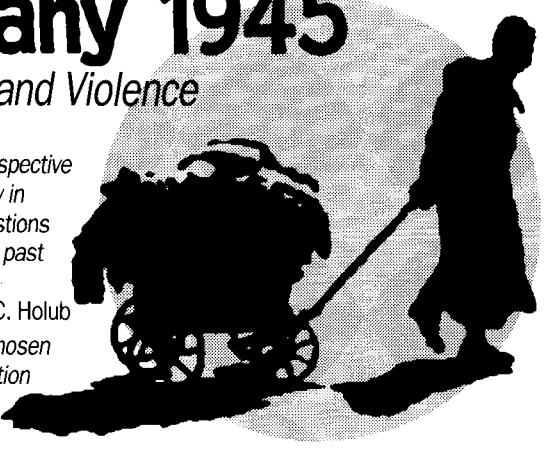

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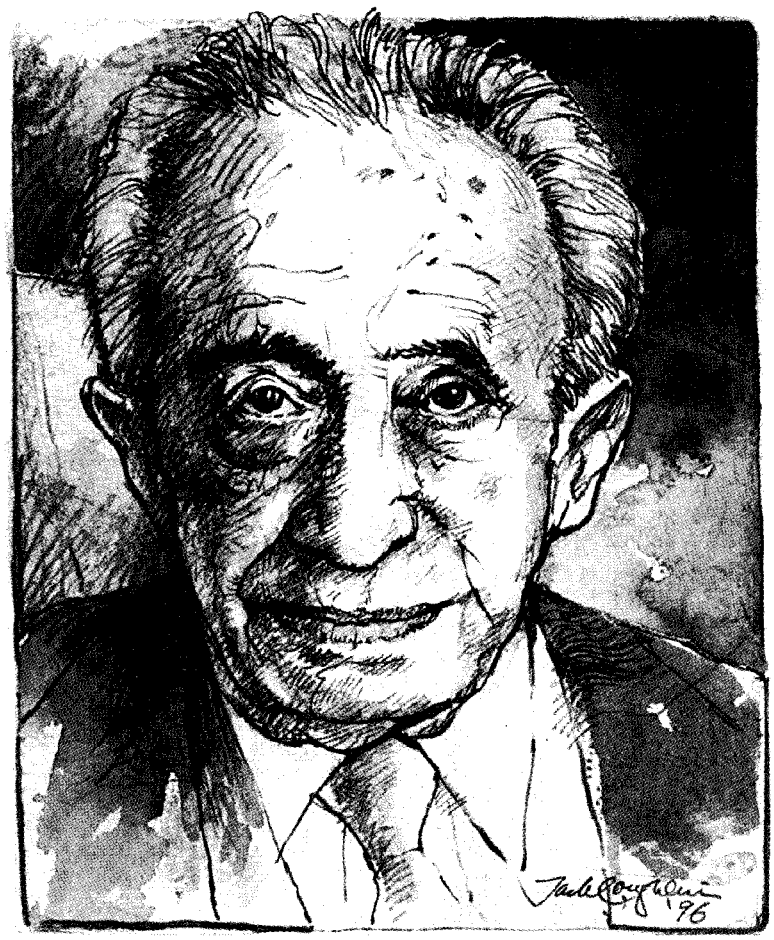
dent of Heidegger, Löwith observes: "The same person who in our Freiburg student days had studied mathematics, music and philosophy, read Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, and whose best friends had been a Jewish girl and I, had not the least scruple about showing complete indifference to the universal fate of the Jews."

Jonas, too, wrote memoiristically, and in a lecture delivered at a memorial tribute to Rudolf Bultmann following his death in 1976, he recounted a more heartening experience from the same dark hour of German-Jewish history:

> It was in the summer of 1933, here in Marburg. We sat around the dinner table with [Bultmann's] lovely, so richly emotional wife and their three schoolgirl daughters, and I related what I had just read in the newspaper, but he not yet, namely, that the German Association of the Blind had expelled its Jewish members. My horror carried me into eloquence: In the face of eternal night (so I exclaimed) the most unifying tie there can be among suffering men, this betrayal of the solidarity of a common fate—and I stopped, for my eye fell on Bultmann and I saw that a deathly pallor had spread over his face, and in his eyes was such agony that the words died in my mouth. In that moment I knew that in matters of elementary humanity one could simply rely on Bultmann, that words, explanations, arguments, most of all rhetoric, were out of place here, that no insanity of the time could dim the steadiness of his inner light.



HANS JONAS BY JACK COUGHLIN FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Jonas emigrated to Jerusalem in 1935. He supported himself with teaching and publishing work. With the onset of the war, he promptly enlisted in the British Army's Jewish Brigade, bypassing a position in military intelligence to serve on the front lines. He fought for five years—the Italian campaign of 1943 was particularly brutal—and in 1945, still wearing a British uniform, he participated in the liberation of his native Germany, thereby fulfilling a vow of twelve years earlier never to return to German soil except as the soldier of a conquering army. Only upon returning to Jerusalem in 1945 did he receive the crushing news that his mother had been murdered at Auschwitz. In 1948, he once again donned a uniform, this time assigned to an artillery unit during the Israeli war of independence. After the war, he emigrated to Canada, where for six years he taught at McGill and Carleton Universities, before settling permanently in New York.

Jonas always maintained that his experience in combat altered his thinking. One of the noticeable gaps in his philosophical training in Germany during the 1920s had been a lack of focus on the body and, more generally, on nature. In Heidegger's seminars, there was never much discussion of either theme. For Jonas, however, the body and nature constituted fundamental aspects of what it meant to be human. Hunger and mortality were irreducible components of human experience, no matter how much post-Cartesian philosophy had sought to minimize or to deny them. As Jonas explains in a brilliant and moving essay, "Science as Personal Experience" (as yet untranslated and strangely missing from the otherwise excellent anthology assembled by Lawrence Vogel):

> The opportunity for reflections on the somatic dimensions of human existence came with [my] years as a soldier during the Second World War, when I was forced to abandon historical research for what one can reflect upon without books and libraries, since it is always at one's disposal. Perhaps the sheer fact of physical exposure, in which the body's fate thrust itself to the fore, and in which its mutilation became a primary fear, helped facilitate this new way of thinking. In any event, at this point I fully rejected the idealist prejudices of the philosophical tradition. I saw its hidden dualism, a thousand-year legacy, refuted by the organism, whose existential attributes we share with all living things. An ontological appreciation of the organism would close the gap that separates the self-awareness of the soul from the knowledge of physics.

In this way, Jonas sought to broaden the methods of existential and ontological analysis that he had learned during his apprenticeship with Heidegger in Marburg. In valuing those aspects of being that we share with non-human life, Jonas insisted, mankind is not thereby degraded. Instead, the prospect of a new cosmic harmony appears. In Jonas's philosophy of nature, the possibility of a genuinely symbiotic relationship between man and nature—the possibility that was suppressed for centuries as a result of the technological domination of nature—reemerges. Thus, in the agonies and the deprivations of war, Jonas had put his training as a phenomenologist to good use. His experience of the precariousness of human life illuminated for him the irreducible proximity of human beings to the rest of organic nature.

Jonas's philosophical output was modest. He produced three major books and several collections of essays. Yet there can be no doubt that he was one of the more original and important philosophical minds of the century. In North America, however, his work never received the broad attention it merited. Walter Benjamin feared that, were he to emigrate to the United States, he would be put on public display as "the last intellectual"; and Jonas, who made few compromises with the intellectual trends of his adoptive homeland, seems to have suffered

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roughly the fate that Benjamin feared. The reigning schools of American philosophy—logical positivism, linguistic analysis, pragmatism—had little use for his incurably European and metaphysical habitudes. For most of his professional life, Jonas was preoccupied with "eternal" philosophical questions: humanity's place in the cosmological scheme of things, the meaning of God after Auschwitz, the ontological basis of ethics. American philosophy, with its hard-nosed empirical bent, had long condemned such questions to the realm of "pseudo-problems."

Ironically, it was in his native Germany, the land that Jonas was forced to flee in 1933, that his intellectual legacy received its proper due. Jonas wrote his major philosophical work, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, a breathtaking meditation on the ethical implications of modern technology, in German. It appeared in 1979 and it catapulted him to international renown. (It was translated into English five years later.) The German edition has sold 200,000 copies, a remarkable number for such a recondite book. With this work on nature and man, Jonas was for once in tune with the spirit of his time. Scholarly conferences were devoted to his work. Rival philosophical schools set out to refute him. Captains of German industry vied to appear with him in public discussions. German news magazines sought him out for interviews and professional counsel. "The imperative of responsibility" (*Das Prinzip Verantwortung*) became something of a shibboleth among the German Greens and their sympathizers.

In 1987, Jonas was awarded the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Booksellers' Association. That same year he received the Distinguished Service Cross of the Federal Republic of Germany. All this acclaim came to him in the ninth and final decade of his life. On February 5, 1993, at the age of 89, Jonas died at his home in New Rochelle, New York.

III.

Jonas came to intellectual maturity amid the turmoil and the uncertainty of the Weimar Republic. In provincial Marburg, Jonas had little direct contact with the modernist spirit of the 1920s, but the intellectual disorientation and perplexity that were its signatures left a profound imprint on his thought, in ways latent and manifest.

On the face of it, Jonas's inaugural study of Gnostic religion, written under the tutelage of Heidegger and Bultmann, was an unambiguously antiquarian undertaking. Gnosticism—from the Greek word for "knowledge"—was a religious orientation peculiar to early Christianity. It propounded a radical dualism between God and the world. It began by positing a primordial condition of divine integrity; and this original unity is subsequently disrupted in the emergence of the world and the demonic powers controlling it. Man becomes the crucial player in this grandiose eschatological pageant, with the restoration of cosmological wholeness contingent upon his salvation. The chasm between heaven and earth was one of Manichean intensity. God was alleged to be entirely supramundane, even acosmic. Only by purifying himself of all mundane attributes and associating himself exclusively with the transcendent divine *pneuma*, or spirit, can man attain salvation. Gnostic doctrine would furnish the secret "knowledge" leading to redemption and unity. As Jonas describes this process in a later article:

> The human constitution is comparable to an onion with many layers, on the model of the cosmos itself but with the order reversed; what is outermost and uppermost in the cosmos is innermost in man, and the innermost or nethermost stratum of the cosmic order, the earth, is the outer bodily garment of man. Only the innermost or pneumatic man is the true man, and he is not of this world, as his original in the total order, the deity, is external to the cosmos

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as a whole. In its unredeemed state the spirit, so far from its source and immersed in soul and flesh, is unconscious of itself, benumbed, asleep, or intoxicated by the poison of the world—in brief, it is ignorant. Its awakening and liberation are effected through knowledge.... Revelation, or the "call," is already a part of salvation. Its bringer is a messenger from the world of Light who penetrates the barriers of the spheres, outwits the archons, awakens the spirit from its earthly slumber, and imports to it the saving knowledge from without.

Jonas described the Gnostic dualism between God and world as deriving from specific social and historical conditions: "the immanent experience of the disunion of man and world [which] reflects a human condition of alienation." It was the early 1930s, and Jonas believed that he had uncovered an analogous dualism, an analogous "human condition of alienation," in the modern period. He concluded that Heideggerian existentialism expressed the same emphatic dichotomy between man and world, the same heightened sense of human alienation from the world. And this realization caused him to reassess his intellectual focus. He gradually relinquished his historical and antiquarian concerns and turned to the philosophical analysis of the present. In response to the agonies that Jonas himself had witnessed—the rise of Nazism, world war, the Holocaust—he would set himself an enormous intellectual task: to uncover the intellectual origins of the crisis of Western civilization and to suggest a new, positive orientation for humanity.

The key to Jonas's diagnosis of the modern age is the idea of nihilism. Modern nihilism, in Jonas's analysis, is an unanticipated consequence of modern science. Science had been so successful in challenging and unmasking every variety of superstition and ungrounded belief that, in the end, it left people with nothing to believe in. For Jonas, the parallels between nihilism and Gnosticism were undeniable. Both expressed a radical crisis of meaning that led to a profound sense of homelessness. Worldly existence was scorned or devalued. All that remained was humanity's self-inflated belief in its own subjectivity.

Nihilism and Gnosticism were the products of a highly volatile situation, as mankind desperately sought to re-establish the lost connection between existence and meaning. In the case of Gnosticism, acosmic sentiments could easily lead to an antinomian attitude of untrammeled licentiousness: since law applied only to the profane sphere of worldly existence, savage transgressions were viewed as the road to the higher sphere, to redemption. As Jonas explains: "there is a positive duty to perform every kind of action, to leave no deed undone, no possibility of freedom unrealized, in order to render nature its due and exhaust its powers; only in this way can final release from the cycle of reincarnations be obtained." Modern nihilism took the form of political messianism, which arose to restore the condition of integrity that has been lost amid the lacerations and divisions of modernity. Political messianism—communism, fascism, varieties of nationalism—also displayed antinomian traits, insofar as it sanctioned unethical means to further the ends of political salvation.

In "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism," which appeared in *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966), Jonas traced the origins of modern nihilism back to the scientific revolution. In the cosmology of classical antiquity, no ontological abyss separated humanity from the natural world. With Christianity, a fissure between humanity and the world began to emerge: man's higher self was spiritual, and life on earth was a veil of tears, though a fallen nature was still God's creation, and the original harmony could still be restored. With the emergence of modern science, however, the prospects for reconciling humanity and nature were abruptly suspended. Nature came to be viewed through the lens of instrumental reason: as an object to be controlled, exploited, manipulated. According to Francis Bacon, "the sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge.... Now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity: but if we would be led by her invention, we should command her by action." In Descartes, the traces of a bond between humanity and nature had been extirpated, and nature was degraded to the status of *res extensa*, or "extended substance." Man, conversely, was redefined as *res cogitans*, or "thinking substance." The ontological chasm was deep and permanent.

Jonas captured the paradox of Descartes's philosophical legacy in this way: "That by which man is superior to all nature, his unique distinction, mind, no longer results in a higher integration of his being into the totality of being, but on the contrary marks the unbridgeable gulf between himself and the rest of existence." With such an understanding, the reason for modern man's "existential homelessness" becomes intelligible. Once the universe is so thoroughly divested of intrinsic meaning, values lose their ontological basis, and the isolated human self is confronted with the daunting prospect of having to generate meaning entirely from within—that is, solipsistically. As Jonas observed, "That nature does not care, one way or the other, is the true abyss. That only man cares, in his finitude facing nothing but death, alone with his contingency and the objective meaninglessness of his projecting meanings, is a truly unprecedented situation." Darwinism completed the disenchantment. According to the traditional view, nature functioned teleologically; it was a repository of prior causes or ends that were predestined to come to fruition. But all such assurances were voided in the aftermath of the theory of evolution. "The Darwinian theory of evolution, with its combination of chance variation and natural selection, completed the extrusion of teleology from nature. Having become redundant even in the story of life, purpose retired wholly into subjectivity." That is, into nihilism.

IV.

Jonas set out to build a philosophical program in which metaphysical questions about the ends of human existence might again be posed. His undertaking was unfashionable, even anachronistic. But his conclusions were remarkable. Unlike many of his contemporaries who recoiled from the tyranny of the scientific worldview, Jonas refused to regress behind the empirical standards that had been established by modern science. He was no reactionary. He did not wish to deny the rigors of science in the construction of a new philosophy of nature. Still, whereas modern physics and biology had come to the conclusion that the universe and life on earth were essentially devoid of intrinsic meaning, Jonas boldly took it upon himself to provide a restoration of such meaning.

But what does it mean to describe life—not just human life, but the totality of organic life—as meaningful? For Jonas, it means that all of organic life may be said to display purposes, strivings, even (in metaphorical or rudimentary form) subjectivity. Jonas took this controversial argument very far. He claimed that all life manifests an innate inclination toward freedom. As he remarks in *The Phenomenon of Life*: "It is in the dark stirrings of primeval organic substance that a principle of freedom shines forth for the first time within the vast necessity of the physical universe—a principle foreign to suns, planets, and atoms." With the emergence of life, the existential distinction between being and non-being acquires sense. Perennially threatened by the prospect of its negation, life must tenaciously maintain itself in being and undertake a series of elaborate and

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resourceful acts of self-preservation if it is to avoid succumbing to its diabolical contrary, death. This drama of life, suspended between non-being and death, establishes the idea of existential purpose in a manner that is entirely foreign to the realm of inorganic nature. This is the "existential paradox" of life: the fact that life carries its own negation within itself is what provides it with the ultimate incentive for self-preservation and self-affirmation.

In Jonas's view, such an understanding of the "unity of life" allows us to surmount the debilitating dualisms of modern thought—mind and body, subject and object, idealism and materialism—in the direction of a holistic naturalism. The extraordinary thing about Jonas's naturalism is that it does not surrender its humanism. Jonas does not diminish or relativize the singularity of human life. Instead he argues that nature itself, like man but in a less developed way, manifests traces of subjectivity. This contention is one of the more controversial aspects of Jonas's thought.

One of the keys to his argument is a brilliant, if highly speculative, understanding of the implications of "metabolism." For Jonas, metabolism suggests a capacity for existential autonomy that distinguishes organic life from the rest of the physical world. The organism's capacity for freedom lies in its formal independence vis-à-vis the material world. At one point in *The Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas refers to the emergence of life as marking an "ontological revolution in the history of matter." Matter remains perennially the same, but life is self-mediating and self-transforming. Jonas goes so far as to attribute selfhood to the entities of organic nature. "An identity which from moment to moment reasserts itself, achieves itself, and defies the equalizing forces of physical sameness all around is truly pitted against the rest of things.... The challenge of selfhood qualifies all [that is] beyond the boundaries of the organism as foreign and somehow opposite: as 'world,' in which, by which, and against which it is committed to maintain itself." Life cannot cease to metabolize without ceasing to be. As Jonas put it, "its liberty itself is its peculiar necessity."

In life's struggle for self-preservation, in its efforts to maintain its boundaries vis-à-vis the inorganic world, Jonas sees anticipations of "mind." Even the lowest forms of organic life anticipate human inwardness or spirit, however faintly. As he explains: "Whether we call this inwardness feeling, sensitivity and response to stimulus, appetition or nisus—in some (even if infinitesimal) degree of 'awareness' it harbors the supreme concern of the organism with its own being and continuation in being.... With the first dawn of subjective reflex, the most germinal 'experience' of touching, a crack as it were opens in the opacity of divided being, unlocking ... the dimension of inwardness." There is a visionary quality to Jonas's marvel at life.

Come on, Dear

It was another era, almost another century,
I was going to say. The saint wept quietly
in her ebony pew. It was the thing to do.
Then garlands of laughter, studded with cloves and lemons,
joined the standing figures with their distant nimbi.
Inexplicably, all was well for a time.

Soon, discordant echoes reined in the heyday:
It was love, after all,
that everybody was talking about
and nobody gave a shit for.
But why am I telling you about all this, who wrote the book,
who stamped his initials in the fairway
for all blokes to see? And if it only came
down to this smidgen, would apes and penguins be any wiser
for all the tunnels of love we shuffled through,
scared by skeletons, by bats, at every turning
of our loose-leafed trajectory through shallow water?

Only when the claret sunset
bleeds again against red day, will all children
get permission to go out where the grass is short,
where the absent-minded postman leaves earnests of his passing
from this day to the next, where the eaves are clipped
close to the houses. Five days from the last clerestory
your ambiance drained into the pockmarked shutters.
Obviously the jig was up. What's that? Whose jig? O I can see clear
ahead into the flying; the poor don't talk much about it,
but her apron is ambrosial with trellised stars,
her stance stares down even the most unquiet,
and on days like this you ride free.
There was such numismatics in his pocket
as only jitterbugs in cyberspace could conjugate.
While from fate's awning the diamond drip descended, bigger
than both of us, big as all outdoors.

JOHN ASHBERY

V.

When Jonas was born, the horse-drawn carriage was still the dominant mode of public transportation. By the end of his life, nuclear fission had been discovered, and "moonwalks" were commonplace, and an ambitious attempt was underway to map our genetic makeup in its entirety. Over the course of the twentieth century, the balance between mankind and the natural world has been radically and permanently altered, largely due to humanity's scientific inventiveness. In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas sought to confront the moral implications of humanity's technological reach.

Man's enhanced mastery of external nature has left him feeling in some ways more secure, but in other ways more insecure. The breathtaking pace of technological change affects not only the relationship between humanity and nature, it also precipitates a plague of doubt, a crisis in humanity's self-understanding. As Jonas puts it: "Outshining in prestige and starving in resources whatever else belongs to the fullness of man, the expansion of his power is accompanied by a contraction of his self-conception and being." Once, mankind's interventions in the natural world were limited in scope, and their consequences were readily foreseeable. For this reason, the balance between humanity and nature was never fundamentally in doubt. But no such assurances can be provided about the impact of modern technology, which has already permanently altered the earth's bio-

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sphere and continues to do so in ways whose consequences have yet to be fully determined. And with the advent of revolutionary medical technologies, our definitions of "life" and "death" themselves have been radically challenged.

More specifically, the new technologies at humanity's disposal have rendered obsolete the ethical discourse that preceded them. Traditional approaches to morality—Aristotle's *phronesis*, Kant's categorical imperative—were premised on human action that fell within well-defined and familiar parameters. Such doctrines were based on historical and biological regularities that seemed immutable. Under the changed situation inaugurated by technological modernity, however, ethical prescriptions that are merely oriented toward "the good," or that are content to treat persons as "ends in themselves," may fail to prevent catastrophe. And so a fundamental re-evaluation of humanity's relation to the natural world has become an ethical imperative. This is the "imperative of responsibility," which Jonas defines as follows: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life."

One of the appealing features of Jonas's approach to environmental ethics—and this distinguishes it from trendy eco-fundamentalisms—is that his insistence that we act responsibly toward nature is "rationalist" and "anthropocentric." For Jonas, one should approach nature with a measure of ethical forbearance not because the earth represents something sacred (as the "Gaiaists" intone), and not because all living species are of equal worth, but because *our* survival, the survival of mankind, is at stake. In this respect, Jonas wears his indebtedness to the Western tradition unfashionably on his sleeve. He has no doubt that humankind is the noblest creature that the evolutionary process has served up. He readily owns up to the fact that the philosophy of nature adumbrated in *The Phenomenon of Life* is guilty of anthropomorphism, insofar as it attributes human purposes ("mind," "subjectivity," "freedom") to subhuman organic life. And there is nothing remotely anti-intellectual about his approach. To be sure, he denounces the one-sidedness of human rationality, its instrumentalist biases; but he believes that only the hand that has inflicted the wound can heal it.

By seeking to ground ethics in life, Jonas wishes to provide morality with an objective basis, in contrast to the subjective character of most modern ethical systems. He defies the old axiom of moral theory and derives "ought" from "is." As he writes in *Mortality and Morality*, in a statement replete with Heideggerian resonances: "Being, in the testimony it gives of itself, informs us not only about what it is but also about what we owe it." (*Mortality and Morality* is a wonderfully representative collection of Jonas's writings, and a fine introduction to his philosophy; and Lawrence Vogel has provided a lucid and thoughtful overview of Jonas's intellectual development, in which his break with Heidegger's nihilism is the turning point.) Were Being deprived of the richness and the variety proper to organic life, it would become faceless and mute, devoid of purpose, ontologically impoverished to an extreme. For Jonas, as for the later Heidegger, the "remembrance of Being" should become a spur to the ethical betterment of humanity.

The urgent demands of the hour suggest the need for what Jonas calls a "heuristics of fear." According to Jonas, it is a characteristic of human beings that we are often more readily motivated by fear than by an appreciation of the good. "This is the way we are made," he contends. "The perception of the malum is infinitely easier to us than the perception of the bonum; it is more direct, more compelling, less given to differences of opinion or taste.... An evil forces its perception on us by its mere presence, whereas the beneficial can be present unobtrusively and remain unperceived, unless we reflect on it." We need a "threat to the image of man to assure ourselves of his true image by the very recoil from these threats." Long-term environmental disruptions are very difficult to work into the short-term horizon of our ethical purview. But since humanity's hypertrophic technological capacities have placed the future of life as such in jeopardy, the threshold for experimentation or risk-taking must be reduced to an absolute minimum, he argues. Driven by a sense of possible catastrophe, a "heuristics of fear" suggests that our technological interventions must be tempered and guided by a "comparative futurology" that keeps its eyes open to the worst-case scenarios. To proceed other than with the greatest vigilance would be to flirt with collective self-annihilation.

VI.

Jonas's vision is hardly beyond criticism. For a start, the vitalistic attribution of "mind" and "subjectivity" to all manifestations of organic nature, down to the cellular level, is very troublesome. By humanizing nature and naturalizing humanity, we strip mankind of its specifically human capacities. Is it really meaningful to speak of the "freedom" of organic molecular life, when, as Jonas himself points out, such freedom, in the form of metabolism, is itself governed by an overriding necessity? Organisms have no choice: they must metabolize or die. By metabolizing, they gain a measure of formal independence vis-à-vis the dead matter of inorganic nature, but does it make sense to equate such limited independence with "freedom"? And don't such comparisons seriously truncate the idea of freedom? Viewed historically, freedom is a hard-won attainment, a condition that is the result of struggle and courage. To suggest affinities between freedom and metabolism implies that we might make do with a much more modest, subhuman notion of freedom's entailments.

Jonas's insistence on life as an absolute value also runs the risk of devaluing our conception of the human good. Instead of setting our sights high, Jonas's metaphysical vitalism tends to privilege "mere life" over the "good life." Here, too, by conferring normative priority on those aspects of life that we share with the rest of organic nature, those features of human life that are peculiarly human—art, friendship, community; that is, the characteristics of human life that separate us from the animal world—are allowed to languish. The price that one pays for reintegrating mankind with the natural world is a diminution of human distinctiveness.

Many of these difficulties turn up in those aspects of Jonas's thought that one might describe as Hobbesian. Jonas's conception of human life is predicated on a pessimistic philosophical anthropology. For both Hobbes and Jonas, the state of nature is anything but benevolent. Hobbes famously describes human interaction there as a war of all against all in which life is "violent ... nasty, brutish, and short." Consequently, the motivations compelling individuals to abandon this condition and to form a social compact are anything but exalted. Their primary incentive to establish society is fear, specifically the fear of a violent death. Jonas's proximity to Hobbes (and, more ironically, to Darwin) becomes clear in his characterization of life as essentially a competitive struggle for survival. By taking nature as his point of departure rather than, say, life in civil society, Jonas is led to anticipate the worst from humanity rather than the best.

The element of resignation implicit in Jonas's metaphysical vision colors his approach to ethics. In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, for example, Jonas con-

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tends that the parent-child relationship is the archetype of human responsibility. For Jonas, again, ethical demands cannot be a matter of subjective human arbitrariness; they must be rooted in the nature of things or in "being." This is one reason why the parent-child relationship suggests itself to him as the paradigmatic case of responsibility: it is something that nearly all human beings have experienced, as parents or as children. In Jonas's view, the fundamental intensity of this bond is so indubitable that he considers it to be universal. As he observes: "When asked for a single instance where that coincidence of 'is' and 'ought' occurs, we can point at the most familiar sight: the newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him." But this is very hard to accept. Surely the parent-child relationship is too unique to serve as a model for moral human relationships. It would be impossible, it should be impossible, to feel a degree of commitment toward strangers and friends comparable to what a parent feels for a child.

When Jonas extends his ethical reflections to the realm of politics, the conclusions are hardly more acceptable. Basing himself once again on the parent-child bond as the archetype of human responsibility, he observes that in a similar manner it is the duty of a statesman to care for his citizens. The paternalistic, anti-democratic implications of such an approach to politics are plain. But the idea of citizens as the "charges" of government follows from Jonas's pessimistic conception of human nature. It is grimly of a piece with premodern theories of political guardianship, most obviously Plato's notion of the philosopher-king. According to such theories, the majority of men and women are incapable of leading virtuous lives, and so the best thing is for them to follow the directives of a sapient elite who comprehend the good and are capable of instructing their intellectual inferiors accordingly. As Jonas remarks: "There is a natural element also within the artificially created officium of the statesman, when he—stepping out of the equality of siblings and citizens—assumes for all of them a role which is parent-like in its responsibilities.... The "statesman" in the term's full sense has, for the duration of his office or his power, responsibility for the total life of the community.... It extends from physical existence to the highest interests, from security to abundance of life, from good conduct to happiness." In his political philosophy, Jonas's experience of the horrifying consequences of paternal-

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istic leadership served him in no good stead at all.

VII.

The same cannot be said of the greater part of Jonas's contributions to contemporary thought. His work is a stirring example of philosophical reflection on this century's horrors. Indeed, some of the most important essays in *Mortality and Morality* concern Jonas's reflections on the state of Jewish theology after Auschwitz. These contributions to post-Holocaust theology are among his most important writings, but they are the aspect of his work that is least known and least understood.

For obvious reasons, the Holocaust poses grave problems for Jewish religious thought. The traditional understanding of God is thrown into radical doubt in the aftermath of the Holocaust, where, unlike previous historical catastrophes, there seems to be no discernible correlation between the massive extent of Jewish suffering and the prior transgressions of His people. So extreme are the evils of the Holocaust that they transcend any theodicy. Even the ideal of martyrdom, or "the sanctification of the Divine Name," which became so important in the persecutions of medieval Jewry, was rendered obsolete by the massified death that the Jews endured at the hands of the Nazis.

One of the first, entirely natural, theological reactions to the catastrophe was to claim that Auschwitz proved that God does not exist. For an omnipotent God would never have permitted Auschwitz to come to pass. Even if the bestialities of Nazism could be construed punitively, as a form of divine punishment for Jewish misdeeds, the deaths of a million children fall entirely outside such a moral calculus. Other theologians, by contrast, have argued that such a conclusion would award Hitler a posthumous, indeed a total, victory. Having almost wiped out European Jewry physically, he would succeed in wresting from the survivors their faith. Even after Auschwitz, such thinkers concluded, the theological task of "mending the world" must continue.

Jonas did not accept either of these conclusions. He denied that the Holocaust provides evidence of God's nonexistence. And he also argues that it would have been impossible for the benevolent and omnipotent God of traditional Judaism to have presided in silence over the gruesome events of Babi Yar, Treblinka and Sobibor. Instead, Jonas travels a different theological path. It is a highly speculative one; but theology must deal with claims that are largely conjectural. According to Jonas, there is another possibility: that God exists but was powerless to intervene. For reasons unknown to us, God may have ceased to be omnipotent. It is possible that divine energies were exhausted in the act of creation; or that in the aftermath of creation God engaged in an act of self-limitation in order to make room for free will. (This latter notion was consistent with the cosmogony of Lurianic Kabbalah, specifically with its doctrine of *tzimtzum*, the self-contraction of God after the creation of the universe, that Gershom Scholem, Jonas's contemporary, was unearthing and explaining.)

To be sure, such thinking damages the traditional notion of an omnipotent God. Still, having "temporalized" Himself in the act of creation, and having allowed Himself to be affected by human suffering, His all-powerfulness already underwent a diminution; and the diminution was a self-imposed one, an ironic expression of His power. As Jonas points out, the presumption of divine omnipotence makes for a cosmos that is almost devoid of interest. And a conception of God that defines Him as omnipotent runs the risk of destroying the freedom of the human will. As Jonas explains: "Absolute power, in its solitude, has no object on which to act. But as objectless power it is a powerless power, canceling itself out: 'all' equals 'zero' here.... Power meeting no resistance in its relatum is equal to no power at all: power is exercised only in relation to something that itself has power." The only way to render the concept of God meaningful after Auschwitz, Jonas suggests, is to avow that His goodness is compatible with the existence of evil, even if that is tantamount to an admission that God is not omnipotent. As Jonas beautifully writes, "Having [in the act of creation] given himself whole to the becoming world, God has no more to give: it is man's now to give to him."

There was an almost Sisyphean quality to Jonas's philosophical labors. In an era dominated by thoughtlessness and technological frenzy, Jonas took it upon himself to refuse to let the "ultimate questions" of Western metaphysics disappear without a trace. His thought stands as a forceful indictment of the shortsightedness of modern Western civilization, of its philosophical poverty. Jonas admired the American society that offered him refuge, but at times he must have fretted about its consequences for the soul. He cannot have admired, certainly, the possessive individualism that has ruthlessly replaced the traditional virtues of America: self-reliance, public spiritedness, civic engagement, piety, rooted communities. In contemporary America, as in contemporary philosophy, Hans Jonas was a saving remnant of the old sort of seriousness. He was not embarrassed by profundity. He joined a genuine philosophical wonder to a genuine humanity, and for that his work deserves to last a long time.

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The Common Reader

BY DANIEL AARON

The Uncollected Critical Writings by Edith Wharton edited, with an introduction, by Frederick Wegener

(Princeton University Press, 322 pp., $29.95)

All great writers, Edith Wharton remarked in 1902, suffer "interlunar" periods of neglect. Her own literary fortunes were then on the rise, but she had already discerned "that belittling process by which each generation thinks to mark its advance over its predecessors." Three decades later she found herself eclipsed by the "younger novelists" whose "exaggerated physical realism," as she put it, and "singularities of dialect and slang" and preferences for "rudimentary" types of the "least developed classes" appealed to a public and to an America from which she felt increasingly alienated.

Wharton's rediscovery after the Second World War was in part a consequence of social and cultural influences, some of which she had not anticipated and probably would have deplored: the

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surge of feminism, the movie industry's vandalizing of classical texts. But for good reasons, too, she is today firmly fixed in the canon, the subject of major biographies and a bountiful number of critical studies. All of her best known fiction is in print. And with the publication of her uncollected "critical" writing, assembled and learnedly introduced by Frederick Wegener, virtually all of her fugitive pieces are now available for inspection.

Seldom reprinted or even mentioned by literary historians, these reviews, essays, introductions, forewords, prefaces, tributes, eulogies and self-reconsiderations constitute (in Wegener's opinion) a critical achievement unmatched by any of her predecessors save Poe, James and Howells. But Wegener's candor weakens his case. Affirming "the undeniable strength" of her criticism, its broad but discriminated learning, apt allusions, aesthetic sensibility and stylistic glitter, he feels obliged to list its limitations. Edith Wharton the critic is neither far-reaching nor "adventurous." She doesn't develop. The injunctions and the illustrative quotations sprinkled through her early essays and reviews keep popping up in her later ones. Wegener finds her comments on the do's and don'ts of fiction writing "embarrassing"—her dictum, for example, that "the only novels that live are those whose characters the readers call by name"—and her biases unworthy. "Many of the least agreeable features of her later period—the deepening intolerance, the reactionary hauteur, the abrasive antimodernism—surface even more virulently in her critical work, while making immitigably explicit the regressive and rather unappetizing social preconceptions on which so much of Wharton's aesthetic judgment ultimately rests."

With friends like this.... After reading some of Wharton's waspish reviews, however, you can see what Wegener means. Her irony bordered on sarcasm and she could be unduly harsh in condemning literary offenses. Although she confessed to William Crary Brownell, her editor and one of a numerous company of male mentors, that her "irrepressible desire to write critical articles" was inhibited by her feelings of "cowardice and incapacity" when she sat down to write them, she seems to have overcome her timidity in short order. She spoke confidently from her pulpit, deferred to the generous and great-hearted men of letters, and disdained "intellectual" women who attended lectures and joined book clubs.

In 1896, at the start of her critical forays, Wharton was in her 30s, already culturally well-upholstered (thanks largely to rigorous self-instruction) and socially assured. Wegener unpersuasively suggests that her study of Middle High German, Old Norse and comparative philology must have honed "a critical intelligence almost preternaturally acute," but her critical principles appear to have derived less from her scholarly proclivities than from Matthew Arnold, the French literary critics—Sainte-Beuve, Taine, France, Lemaître, Faguet among others—and above all from Henry James. Her essays are of interest chiefly because they enact the intellectual and cultural adventures of a woman of letters, disciplined perceiver of architecture, gardens and interior decoration, and reader of solid books in science and philosophy as well as belles-lettres. A rationale for her literary practices and social attitudes, they disclose a novelist who, for all her intrepidity, her guarded fascination with the wild and illicit and her bursts of impatience with genteel restraints, clung to "final values" (her phrase) and traditional ways. What she wrote of George Eliot applies equally well to herself: "She felt no call to found a new school of morals. A deep reverence for family ties, for the sanctities of tradition, the claims of slowly acquired convictions, and slowly formed precedents, is revealed in every page of her books."

To say this is not to question Wharton's professed delight in "intellectual vagrancy" and (as she puts it in her review of Harold Sturgis's novel, *Belchamber*) in "the desultoriness, the irregularity, of life caught in the act, and pressed still throbbing between the leaves of the book." Her love of Whitman's verse was genuine and, given her background, unusual. During her adolescence, she recalled, Whitman was "just beginning to circulate among the most advanced intellectuals," but his work was still "kept under lock and key, and brought out, like tobacco, only in the absence of 'the ladies.'" The Whitman whom she cherished was "a great and conscious artist," a reconciler of flesh and spirit, sanctifier of her ecstatic interlude with her short-time lover, Morton Fullerton. But he was distinctly not the lawless democrat of "Song of Myself."

It says something about Wharton's private pact with Whitman that she never finished the essay that she planned to write about him. Nor did democrats of his kidney slip into her literary household. She felt more at ease with men and women whose tastes and social ideals didn't jar with her own. From this minor-

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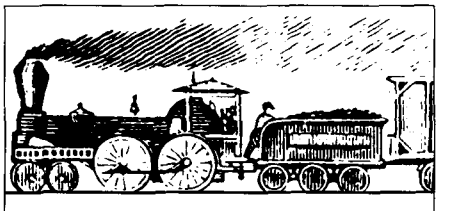

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ity she selected her intimates, some of them the subjects of her eulogies and testimonials. Collectively, they embodied Wharton's conception of the Sovereign Critic, one committed to harnessing and guiding raw creative impulse. "The boundless gush of 'life,' to be tested and savored," she wrote, "must be caught in some outstretched vessel of perception." Her harping on form, design, control, was, in Wegener's words, "a plea for stability, order, and consensus" and a call for cultural arbiters comparable to the trained French intelligentsia she unceasingly commended.

American critics, by Wharton's reckoning, lacked both the technical skills and the general culture of their Old World counterparts. They served up standardized fare to the standardized inhabitants of "a safe, shallow, and shadowless world." Her contrast between America's meager culture and the thicker-textured civilization of Europe simply echoed a litany most eloquently sounded by Henry James: namely, that it took wealth and leisure to engender an atmosphere in which the "impalpable dust of ideas ... the real culture," could float, and that "a colony of ants or bees will never create a Parthenon."

Such sentiments measure the gulf between Wharton and the "young novelists" whom she admonished in the late 1920s and the 1930s. The very titles of her essays—"The Great American Novel," "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," "Permanent Values in Fiction"—carry an intonation of reproof. One wonders what they made of her declarations, injunctions and caveats, or if they even bothered to read her.

> All forms of art are based on the principle of selection, and where the principle is held of no account in the sum-total of any intellectual production, there can be no genuine criticism.
>
> .... reading is no more a virtue than breathing. Just in proportion as it is considered meritorious, does it become unprofitable.
>
> It is hardly disputable that intelligent criticism is help to every degree of ability short of genius, and even genius may be helped by criticism intelligent enough to recognize it.
>
> It is less dangerous for an artist to sacrifice his artistic instincts to the pursuit of money or popularity than to immolate them to a theory.

Wharton could only hope that in time the young modernists would acquire "the patience to explore and depict the enduring characters of human nature under the shifting surface of slang and sexuality."

In her last years (she died in 1937) Wharton freely vented her antipathies, among them her dislike of "that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose" and of novelists who exchanged their creative faculties "for a kodak," or recorded their characters' subconscious sensations instead of singling out their "conscious thoughts and deliberate actions," a much harder task. Publishers who induced novice authors "to seize the first short-cut to notoriety and pecuniary profit" she considered especially reprehensible. She had lightly touched on this last iniquity in an essay in 1903, in which the young writer-pilgrim accompanies his "prosperous fellow-travellers" on the broad highway to Vanity Fair and ends up in the "Palace of Platitudes" feasting "with the scribblers he has most despised" while "his thoughts turn longingly to that other way—the strait path leading 'To the Happy Few.' "

The most entertaining passages in this collection are likely to be the most personal, in which her olympian style of putdown, learned facetiousness and surgical irony are on display and the satirist subsumes the pundit. Proust, "a very great novelist," evokes her pieties ("I believe the fundamental cause of his isolation is that the only thing that interested him was the drama of the soul"), and Maurice Hewlett, a once popular writer of medieval romances, evokes her wit. Hewlett was known for his series of "leading ladies, of whose carnal charms one has been told in so many more or less similar pages" (she is here reviewing one of his forgettable novels), Wharton describes Hewlett's heroine standing

> before the reader with a certain definitiveness of outline, marred only by an occasional reversion to type. She starts out, for instance, thin to emaciation, and pale to the point of evanescence, but as the novelist warms up to his subject (and Mr. Hewlett is nothing if not warm) she grows into the "high-bosomed beauty" with whom his pen habitually consorts, and surprises the reader by an unexplained accession of embonpoint and complexion. As she and her companion are subjected to almost continuous hardship, physical and mental, and for a great part of the time are engaged in hard manual labour on an insufficient diet, one can only assume that Mr. Hewlett, tied by the company of a thin girl with no colour, has let his imagination momentarily stray to more congenial society.

EDITH WHARTON BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

In this vein, the image of Edith Wharton as the starchy punctilious mandarin is contravened by the novelist who relished a flavor of oddity and ruffled decorum.

The prevailing presence in Wharton's critical writing is Henry James, a tutelary deity to be challenged (at least in his late phase, when she thought his literary opinions had hardened into formu-

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la) and on occasion half-resented for his genial disparagements. "Sometimes," she remembered, "his chaff was not untinged with malice." She learned to fear his "terrifying benevolence," to wait for the humiliating "dressing-down" likely to follow a fulsome compliment. Yet she never ceased paying homage to her master and affectionate friend. Her review of his letters, in 1920, brings out the best of her, as it does in him. Let others call him "a super-subtle carver of cherrystones." She knew that "the vital matter for him was always *subject*, and the criterion of subject the extent of its moral register." She suffered vicariously when writers he volubly praised failed to grasp "what he was trying for." She rejoiced in his style, not lax but "always ample," and indulgently observed that "he took a great deal of space to turn around in." But it was his talk, of which his letters "gave mere hints and fragments," that most delighted her and sealed what was to her a special friendship—talk "sunned over by irony, sympathy, and wide-flashing fun."

There is little of that sympathy or "wide-flashing fun" in Wharton's criticism. More often than not, her humor is chilled by scorn, her smile is wintry, her irony is a barrier to keep sloppy mankind at a distance. She might quote Nietzsche and Whitman in her notebooks and letters, but corseted by the conventions that she both satirized and respected, Wharton couldn't publicly embrace the emancipating messages of those thinkers. She stuck instead to the confines of her socially segregated "republic of the spirit." More and more she felt out of place (as she says of one of her characters) in a "crowded topsy-turvy" America with its "new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations."

The relaxation of morals, the elasticity of conscience, the ravages of frivolity: these had long been the stuff of Edith Wharton's most memorable fiction. But the critical essay wasn't the happiest medium for her playful severities. It constrained her, narrowed her range, enhanced a didacticism that she kept under wraps in her novels and shorter works. The essay short-circuited her genius, and lent a cold formality to her prose.

DANIEL AARON is professor emeritus of English at Harvard University.

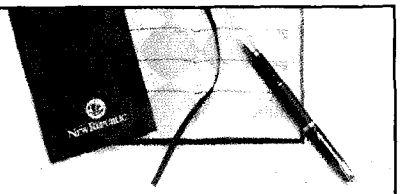
TRB *continued from page 6*

met with senior Democratic Party officials to plot their campaign-year fundraising. They set themselves a goal of between $120 million and $125 million. To meet that goal, Clinton essentially rented out himself, the vice president and the White House. Donors of $10,000 to $25,000 met with Gore or were invited to 100-person dinners with the president. (One $20,000 donor photographed with Gore had been twice convicted and imprisoned on felony drug charges.) Givers of $50,000 to $100,000 got intimate little dinners with the president in hotels near the White House, or hour-long chats over coffee in the White House's Map Room. (One coffee club member, invited to meet Clinton in the White House last February at the request of Trie, was Wang Jun. Wang is the chairman of Poly Technologies Inc., a major international arms dealer which U.S. intelligence officials say is owned and run by the Chinese army. At the time Wang met the president, investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Customs Service were wrapping up a sting operation that caught Wang's company with at least $4 million in illegal semi-automatic weapons.) Really generous Friends of Bill—supporters who raised at least $700,000 and often gave at least another $100,000 personally—got trips on Air Force One, golf with the president, presidentially guided tours of the White House and, the plum, a night in the Lincoln Bedroom.

• The president and his men set out to tap a previously unexploited source, wealthy Asian Americans. To this end, they turned to John Huang, a former trade official in Ron Brown's Commerce Department who was made vice chairman of finance at the DNC. Huang raised $3.4 million from Asian Americans and Asian corporations. Much of what he raised was, unquestionably, blatantly illegal; so far, the DNC has returned $1.2 million of the Huang money. Among Huang's greatest hits: a fundraiser at a Buddhist temple where Al Gore raised $140,000 among the mendicants; $250,000 in illegal donations from Pauline Kanchanalak, a citizen of Thailand who represents a mammoth Thai conglomerate called the Charoen Porkaphand Group, and whose twenty-six visits to the White House included a coffee session last June between the president and executives of Charoen Porkaphand; an illegal $250,000 contribution from a South Korean corporation; and a highly dubious $450,000 contribution from an Indonesian couple possessed of modest means and ties to Indonesian multi-millionaire James Riady. All of the DNC fund-raising programs were reviewed weekly by senior White House officials, including Ickes and White House political director Douglas Sosnik.

At what point will the president's partisans admit there might be a there here?

MICHAEL KELLY



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WASHINGTON DIARIST

Spanking the city

I READ THE PHONE NUMBER scrawled on the Post-It note. For two weeks, it's been on the freezer door. I punch the first six digits on the phone, then hang up. I pace my apartment. Ten minutes later I dial the six digits again. I hang up again. The scene repeats itself over and over. Three hours later, I finally get the courage to dial all seven digits.

"Cable guy," a man at the other end answers brusquely.

"Uhhhh . . . " I respond, sounding like I did as a gangly seventh-grader, forced to ask a girl to dance at some suburban bar mitzvah.

"Yo. I said 'cable guy.' Anyone there?" In the background, phones are ringing continuously; it sounds like a PBS telethon.

"Uhhhh . . . I'd like you . . . to uhhhh . . . to come look at . . . uhhhh . . . at my pay-per-view."

"You want what?"

"My pay-per-view—it's not coming through so clear. Could you come take a look at it?" That's my attempt to be discreet. The primary reason for my reception problems: I don't pay for pay-per-view.

"Look kid, we don't do fix-its. You wanna box?"

"Really? You have those? Sure," I say innocently, as if this weren't precisely the purpose of my call. After he reads me four different options, I pick "Package B," which unscrambles HBO, Cinemax, Showtime and all the pay-per-view channels. He tells me to be in my apartment in forty-five minutes with two $20 bills, a $10 and a $5.

An hour later the box sits on my kitchen table where it will stay for two weeks. I'm too scared to use it. One day, my hands shaking, the room darkened, I plug it in. Instantly, I can channel-surf the latest movies, boxing matches and concerts for free. I'll never go back.

MANY OF MY FRIENDS ALSO "TASTE," "pull down," "extract," "sip," "borrow" or "monitor" cable television. For them, it's never "stealing." They say District Cablevision is a big monopolistic utility. "When I get it for free their costs don't really go up," one told me. Don't even try arguing about lost revenue or making shoplifting analogies. They don't get it. But for me, it *is* theft. And that's exactly why I do it. District Cablevision isn't the only one being robbed—so is the D.C. government. A nickel on every dollar spent on cable television goes to the city's treasury. It's one of D.C.'s few remaining profit centers. Each time I steal a movie, the city's budget crisis gets slightly worse. And only by driving the District into worse fiscal despair can salvation ever come. Only then will Congress honestly rethink home rule or return the city to Maryland. Old-time Marxists used to call this kind of strategy "heightening the contradictions." Stealing cable is part of my one-man guerrilla war to save the city. At least that's what I tell myself when I sit down to watch *Twister* for the third time.

FOR YEARS D.C. OFFICIALS have tried to maximize cable revenue. Essentially, their answer is pay-per-view. By getting more people to spend money on movies and other special programs, the city has almost doubled its take, up to $2.4 million this year. Basically, they sell stroke movies. While high-profile boxing matches and the like boost pay-per-view sales, it is smut—aired daily on a local outlet called the Spice Channel—that's the city's real bread and butter. Spice is unbelievably tacky. It offers home shopping for sex toys along with soft-core fare—negligibly plotted movies featuring personal trainers, nymphomaniac maids and so on. Naturally, it's been an enormous success. Before District Cablevision unveiled Spice in June, 1993, 233 people bought pay-per-view. One month later that figure was near 700. While the cable company no longer releases figures, one industry official estimated that 1,000 movies are now bought daily—80 percent of them on Spice.

STEALING CABLE IS ONLY HALF OF my war on D.C.'s budget. Recently, most of my energy has been spent trying to erode the city's other profit center: parking tickets. Sure, schools are crumbling, garbage isn't picked up and murders go uninvestigated, but D.C. may have the most efficient meter maids in the country. During last year's blizzard, when the city couldn't muster up enough snow plows to clear vital thoroughfares for a week, the parking police gave $100 tickets to volunteers with four-wheel-drive cars who were driving senior citizens to the hospital. In fact, parking violations brought in more than $39 million last year. This must be stopped. On the back of every traffic ticket is an option allowing the ticket-holder to "admit with explanation." If you check this box, you write a letter describing the circumstances and asking for clemency. This forces a claims agent to respond. That costs D.C. money. Last winter, I received a $15 parking ticket at 4:17 p.m. I sent the following letter: "Dear Sir: I apologize for the parking error. Yes, you are right; there is a sign that says I cannot park on this street in the afternoon. I saw your sign, but obviously you did not see mine. In the rear window I have a sticker that indicates I am a devout member of the Laerton [note: this spells "not real" backwards] religion. Sure, we are not as powerful as the Christians and Jews, but that's not what the Constitution is about. For shame! As you read this you're probably realizing your silly error. The ticket is timed only minutes after the 4:15 p.m. Tuesday sabbath. Laertons, of course, cannot drive after this holy time. So at precisely 4:15 p.m., I stopped my car, got out and walked the rest of the way home. Actually, sabbath snuck up on me, too. I'm glad that at 4:14 p.m. I was driving in the right-hand lane. It would have been awfully inconvenient if I had stopped in the center or left lanes. I planned to return twelve days later (coincidentally, Wednesday begins the eleven-day atonement period which prohibits any movement of the legs) to retrieve my car. Thanks for dropping the charges. If you'd like to learn more about our religion, please stop by our house of worship. If not, I could send you a calendar indicating all important Laerton holidays that you could give to your meter maids to encourage sensitivity." A week or two later, I received a letter saying I'd have to appear before a judge to explain my extenuating circumstances. Since I figured paying city employees to examine my letter had already negated any profits, I just paid up.

I'VE WRITTEN OTHER LETTERS TO muck up the enforcement machinery. Once I wrote that my car has a tendency to wander and "try as hard as I do" it just won't stay in the garage (they didn't believe me). I've asked for the ticket to be translated into French (it was). In April, I sent them a crayon drawing I made on construction paper called "Spring 1996" and said it was valued at $20—the same price as the ticket. I didn't get a response. In October, the city eliminated the "admit with explanation" box to save $3 million. So this summer was my last challenge. I went down to the traffic office and told a clerk there that I'm "morally opposed" to traffic tickets. She told me, not unreasonably, to "get a life."

EMAN LAERTON

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Where We Stand

By Albert Shanker, President
American Federation of Teachers

Remembering Teachers

One thing school friends do when they get together after a long time is reminisce about their teachers. They groan about the teacher who made choral music or seventh-grade gym a misery, and they remember their favorite teachers, the ones who had a lasting influence on their lives. Undoubtedly these favorite teachers are as different as the former students who are recalling them, but I think that they often share an important quality—a passionate devotion to the subject they taught.

These teachers knew and loved what they taught.

A couple of years ago, I picked up an excellent book about teachers and teaching that illustrates this point. *A Special Relationship: Our Teachers and How We Learned* (Pushcart Press, 1991) presents comments from a number of famous people about their teachers. The editor, John Board, didn't call these people up and question them—many of the people he wanted to "interview," like Helen Keller, John Muir, and Louis Sullivan, were no longer alive. Besides, he wanted to see what, if anything, these people had to say about the teachers who were important to them when they were not on the spot. So he combed through their memoirs and came up with some remarkable tributes to teachers. In almost every case, these favorite teachers were in love with their subject, and, because attaining great knowledge and the skill to deploy it requires discipline, they also demanded hard work of their students.

Civil rights leader Roy Wilkins says that his plans to become an engineer "melted in a new lust for books and writing" when he met Miss Mary E. Copley, his eighth-grade teacher:

> Whitman once said that he was simmering, simmering, simmering until Emerson brought him to the boil, and that is precisely what Miss Copley did for me. The high school had an excellent library, and I read everything I could lay my hands on: Chaucer, Homer, Shakespeare, Longfellow, Robert Burns, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Tennyson....I also read *Souls of Black Folk*. I knew by heart the basic axiom of Du Bois.

Mark Van Doren, a writer, teacher, and scholar, talks about the powerful influence of a principal who covered a class about Shakespeare's *Macbeth* when Van Doren's regular teacher was sick:

> In forty minutes he created a world—perhaps *the* world—and I was never to forget it. This was powerful teaching; it assumed maturity in us who listened; it spoke to that maturity; and insofar as such a thing can be done to a boy of thirteen, it made me a reading man.

And novelist MacKinlay Kantor describes the effect of Miss Grace Bidlack's eighth-grade course in American history:

> The America she gave her boys was a heritage of sweat, bullets, tattered flags, war-whoops, red footprints in the snow. To children who previously had found stimulation in [boys' adventure books], she suddenly discovered the thrill and significance of our national past. We galloped with Nathaniel Bacon, we snaked through the swamps with King Philip....We paced the chilly streets of Philadelphia with Robert Morris, ringing doorbells, demanding money for the ragged Continental Congress....
>
> I am by no means tricked into falsehood along with my sentimental recollection. I have not lost touch with my youth. I see others of Miss Bidlack's boys every now and then, and we always talk of her.

There is no question what made these teachers stand out in the memories of their former students. They knew and loved what they taught and communicated that. It is too bad, then, that there is a prejudice against content among many members of our educational establishment. Prospective teachers are often indoctrinated with the idea that they should "teach the student, not the subject." This means focusing on the process of learning—on "problem solving," "higher-order thinking skills," and "critical thinking," rather than American history or *Macbeth* or W.E.B. Du Bois. The terms may sound impressive, but without content, students don't have anything to think about—or, probably, any interest in thinking. Subject matter, as the great teachers in John Board's book knew, is the life's breath of learning.

As a part of reforming our education system, we need to think about what we consider important in a teacher. Of course, good teachers are skilled in techniques of what we now call classroom management. They are sensitive to who their students are and know what kinds of approaches will help the youngsters learn. But these things are worth very little unless a teacher knows and loves the subject. So our reforms must reestablish the preeminence of subject matter by setting standards that focus on content and curricula and assessments attached to these standards. When this happens, content will assume its correct place in preparing young teachers. And then teachers like Grace Bidlack and Mary E. Copley—teachers who are in love with their subject—will once more be the models to which everyone in the profession aspires.

To order *A Special Relationship*, send $30 to Pushcart Press, Wainscott, NY 11975.

Mr. Shanker's comments appear under the auspices of the American Federation of Teachers. Reader correspondence is invited. Address Mr. Shanker at AFT, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. © 1997 by Albert Shanker. Visit the AFT web site (http://www.aft.org).

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